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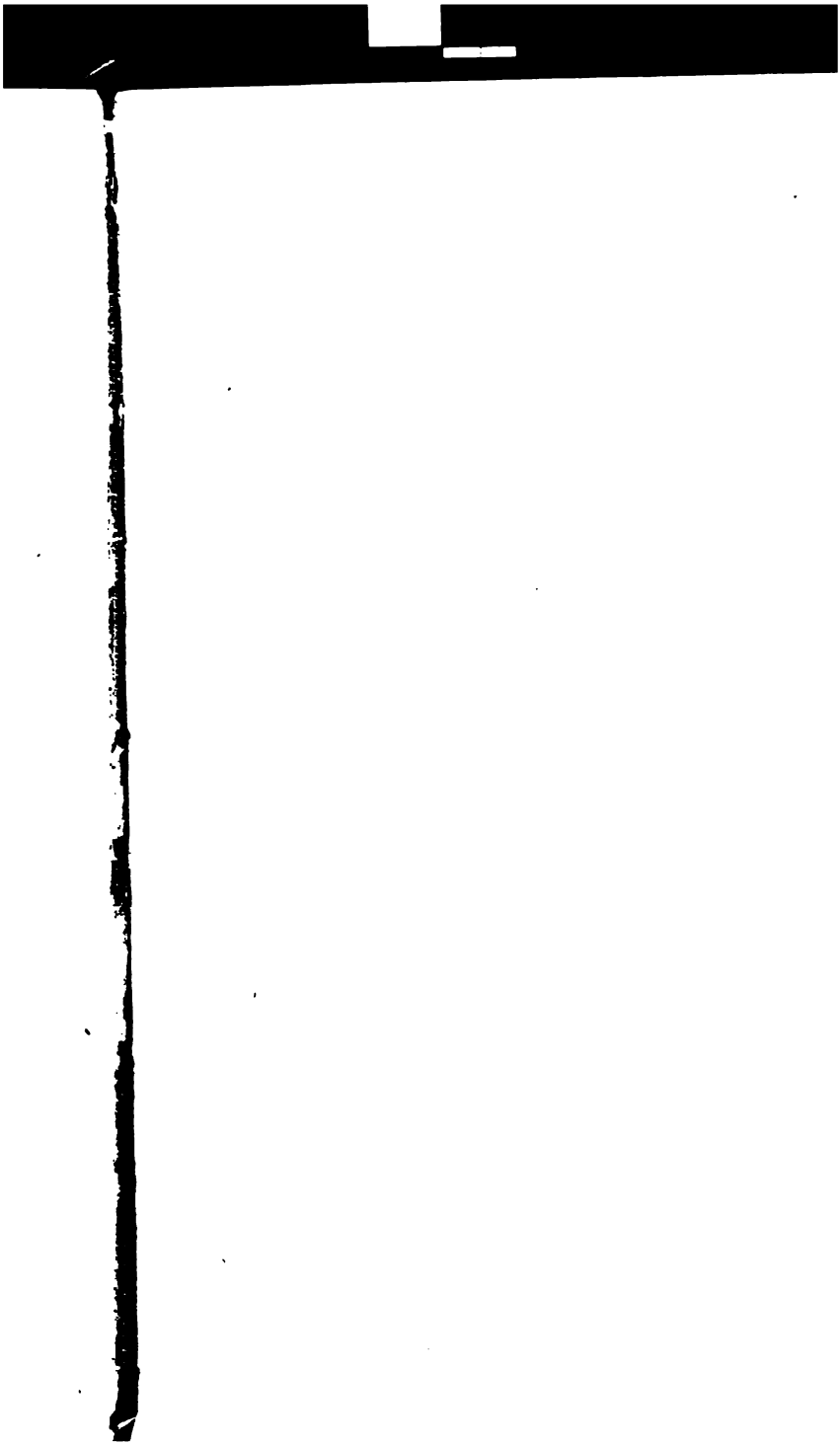
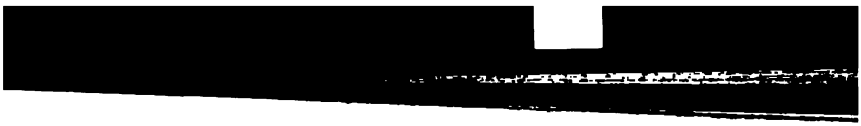




BY L. ALLEN HARKER

MONTAGU WYCHERLY

ALLEGRA

CHILDREN OF THE DEAR COTSWOLDS

JAN AND HER JOB

THE FFOLLIOTS OF REDMARLEY

MISS ESPERANCE AND MR. WYCHERLY

MR. WYCHERLY'S WARDS

MASTER AND MAID

CONCERNING PAUL AND FIAMMETTA

A ROMANCE OF THE NURSERY

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

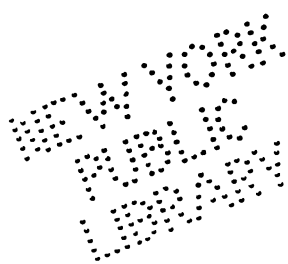
MONTAGU WYCHERLY

[redacted]

MONTAGU WYCHERLY

A REVISED EDITION OF
"HIS FIRST LEAVE"

L. ALLEN HARKER



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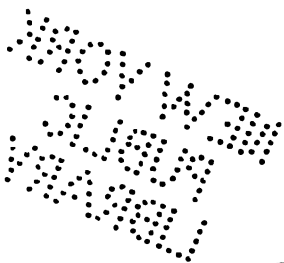

TO

O. A. H.

"Car, vois-tu, chaque jour je t'aime davantage,
Aujourd'hui plus qu'hier et bien moins que demain."

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MONTAGU WYCHERLY

[redacted]

MONTAGU WYCHERLY

PROLOGUE

THEIR MEETING

"In the clatter of the train
Is a promise brisk and bright."

W. E. H.

THE up-platform of the station was singularly empty, and a tall, thin young man, surrounded by several large packing-cases, had plenty of time to watch the few passengers waiting for the London train. Two people in particular attracted his attention, a severe-looking elderly lady, with guardian and chaperon writ large on every fold of her austerely appropriate grey travelling costume, accompanied by an upright, slim young girl wearing a crimson coat that entirely covered her short frock and a Tam-o'-Shanter cap of the same cheerful hue perched jauntily above her long fair hair. It was the hair that first challenged attention, and kept it—abundant, manifestly much-brushed hair, golden, with glints of red on the big waves where they caught the sunlight. He of the packing-cases looked pleasantly interested as he watched the gay, girlish figure to the end of the platform, noting with approval how well she carried herself, and how straight was the flat back under the swinging hair: and as she turned he found himself waiting with almost breathless anx-

iety till she should come near enough for him to see her face. As she neared and passed him, he gave a sigh of relief. It was all right. The face was in keeping with the hair, which broke into delicious little curls and ripples round the white forehead under the Tam-o'-Shanter.

The young man left his packing-cases to take care of themselves, and followed the crimson coat at a respectable distance. The London train came in with a roar and rush, and red coat and grey took their places in a first-class carriage. He had been going third, but, on seeing this, suddenly altered his mind, rushed to the booking-office, changed his ticket, and at the last moment, amid much banging of doors and shouting of porters, sank breathless into a corner seat, opposite her of the crimson coat. The grave grey lady was also opposite in the other corner, both sitting with their backs to the engine to avoid the smuts.

This was exactly what the intruder (for as such it was evident that the elder lady regarded him) did not succeed in doing. For hardly had he unfolded a newspaper in a well-bred effort not to stare too shamelessly at the pleasant prospect in front of him than a minute piece of coal was blown through the open window into his eye, and he spent the next five minutes in frenzied, but quite fruitless attempts to get it out, with every prospect of complete sightlessness till he should do so. In addition to the fact that it was very painful and inconvenient, he was acutely conscious that he must cut a sorry figure in the eyes of his opposite neighbour, if he was to spend all his time with streaming eyes and aggressively prominent pocket-handkerchief during the seventy minutes' run to Paddington.

After watching him concernedly for several minutes, the girl leant forward and touched his knee, saying

eagerly, "Do you think I could get it out? I often get flies out for my father when we're driving; he says I'm quite good at it. May I tear a little bit off your newspaper and try? I'll be very careful not to hurt you."

Before the afflicted youth could answer she took off her gloves and tried, but the express bumped and swayed and swayed and bumped, and although her patient held his unfortunate eye open with the greatest fortitude and she declared that she could see the offending piece of coal "quite well," yet just as she touched it with the paper his head would give a lurch and the chance was gone.

The lady in the opposite corner laid aside her book, watching these unconventional proceedings with evident disapproval, but as yet she had offered no active interference.

At her fifth fruitless attempt the little girl demanded her chaperon's assistance. "Oh, Miss Grant," she cried, "do come and hold his head steady, then he could hold me, and I'd get it out directly. It's impossible to do it with his head bobbing about like this."

The patient very naturally protested at giving these kind ladies any further trouble, and wouldn't hear of Miss Grant so far incommoding herself as to stand up in a swaying carriage to hold his head. But there was that about the little girl which suggested she was accustomed to having her own way: the assistance of Miss Grant was enlisted: that lady held his head as in a vice: he held the operator very steady indeed, and in three minutes the piece of coal was displayed to his admiring gaze, reposing on the torn margin of his newspaper. He blew his nose for the last time that journey, and they all three settled into their places feeling very friendly.

The young man, with what he considered Machi-

avellian diplomacy, addressed most of his conversation to the elder lady. But the little girl had no intention of being left out; she was very communicative indeed, informing him that she was just fourteen, that she was going to school after Christmas, and that then she was on her way to stay with an aunt in London, the very first time she had ever stayed away from home without either of her parents. "But Miss Grant is with me, you see; she is my governess"—here the girl gave a quaint little bow in the direction of Miss Grant—"and she's going to take me this afternoon to be fitted for a new habit and top boots. I've not had real top boots before."

In return, her patient confided to her that he had been down to Oxford to say good-bye to certain old friends there, and was sailing for India in a week, as he had just passed into the I.C.S.

"What's that?" asked the little girl curiously.

"Indian Civil Service, you know; it's rather a good service," he added with modest pride.

"Are you going to take all those big boxes with you to India?" she asked.

"Oh dear no! Those boxes are full of books. I've just been to Oxford to fetch them. They're going to be stored in London, just as they are. It seems such a pity, doesn't it? so many books shut up in boxes; but I can't take them out with me, and I shan't be home for six years, unless I take privilege leave and come back for three months at the end of three."

The young man's voice was a little sad, and so was his face; he wore a black tie and a crape band was on his arm.

"I suppose," said Miss Grant, "in India insects are very destructive to books, and if rare and valuable you would not care to risk taking them?"

Miss Grant had thawed considerably since the stranger's profession and the nature of the packing-cases had been disclosed. Being one of those people who invariably jump to wrong conclusions, she had at first set him down as a commercial traveller. She now informed him that her uncle was a judge in Calcutta, and became so interested and condescending that the embryo Indian Civilian was emboldened to offer her his card: shyly and diffidently, it is true, but still he did it—and the fair-haired little girl, leaning across to read the card in her governess's hand, exclaimed, "Why, how funny! 'M. Bethune Wycherly' —you've got *our* name. I'm Herrick Wycherly."

"Why, then you must be——"

"Yes," she interrupted, "that was me. I came with dad and mother to see Great-uncle Montagu at Oxford. It was years and years ago, and I was very small—do you remember me?"

"Yes, indeed I do, and I remember thinking what a pretty name you had."

"Yes, isn't it?" the owner of the name replied complacently. "I'm called Herrick because the very day I was born my daddie found a copy of the 'Hesperides' in an old book-shop; a real *old* copy, you know—the 1648 edition—and I was christened on Robert Herrick's baptismal day, too, the twenty-third of August. But which Wycherly are you? I believe we're all related, somehow."

"I'm not a real Wycherly. Bethune is my own name, but as I was called after my guardian, he wanted me to have his surname as well, and I'm only too proud to have anything that belonged to him. Those books were all his."

"Then," Herrick exclaimed triumphantly, "I know quite well who you are. You are one of those little

boys Great-uncle Montagu adopted. I've heard all about you. I suppose you're the clever one who got scholarships and things. Where's your brother? Is he like you? My father will be so interested. He saw Great-uncle Montagu just that once at Oxford. He wondered so where all those books would go; he loves books, too, you know. He'll be so glad to think they won't be sold and scattered: he wondered if you'd sell them, as he knew you were going abroad——"

"*I* sell them! Sell my guardian's books!" Montagu exclaimed indignantly; "why, I've spent the last week at Oxford, packing them all myself. I would have given them to his College, for some of them are very old and valuable, only he wanted them to stay in the family, and I shall retire some day, of course, and then——"

Montagu spoke with some heat. The colour had rushed to his pale face, and the little girl, evidently feeling she had in some way offended, said soothingly, "You see, dad doesn't know you, so he couldn't tell what you would be like. I am sorry that you can't take them out to India, though; won't you miss them dreadfully?"

"What vexes me," said Montagu, "is that no one should have the benefit of them all the time I am away. I asked one or two of the dons, but they hadn't any of them room to store them for me. You see, most of them have a good many books of their own, yet any scholar would love them."

"I'm sure my father would," Herrick said heartily. "Next to mother and me, I think he loves his books better than anything in the world."

Montagu looked at her very attentively for a minute, as if trying to remember something, then he said:

"Miss Wycherly, isn't Lady Alicia Carruthers your grandmother?"

"Yes," said Herrick, but without much enthusiasm, "that's grannie."

"I knew her and your mother when I was quite a little boy. She was very kind to us all, but I haven't seen her since I went to school. Is she still in Scotland?"

"Yes, grannie lives in Edinburgh now; we go to see her every year; I'll tell her about you."

For a minute nobody spoke; then, as though he had arrived at some momentous decision, Montagu said eagerly, "Miss Wycherly, will you give me your father's address? There is something I should very much like to ask him."

Herrick wrote it on one of Montagu's cards in round, somewhat unsteady handwriting. The train slowed up into Paddington station and he saw the ladies into a cab.

"Good-bye, Cousin Montagu!" Herrick cried as she leant out of the hansom (her governess had wanted a four-wheeler, but of course Herrick finally got her own way). "Come and see us when you get back from India; don't forget, mind; and look here! when you shoot a tiger you might send me the skin—I'd like one for my room most awfully. Good-bye! Good luck!"

Montagu put his packages into the left-luggage office and drove to his hotel. He was pleasantly excited by this chance meeting with that delightful little girl, and catching sight of his own face in one of the mirrors on his hansom, found himself smiling idiotically at the agreeable recollection. On reaching his hotel he sought the reading-room at once and sat down to write a letter. For a long time did he sit motionless,

his head in his hand; thinking hard, cudgelling his brains for all he had ever heard of these Wycherlys, gradually he remembered how, while he was still quite a little boy, he had heard people talking about pretty Margaret Carruthers and her marriage with his guardian's nephew, William Wycherly, this William Wycherly being in trade at the time, and considered but a poor match for a girl of Margaret Carruthers' social position and many charms; how twelve years after this event, while Montagu was at Oxford, he heard that Mrs. Wycherly's aunt, Miss Margaret Carruthers, had died, leaving an old Manor House on the Cotswold Hills and some two thousand a year to her namesake; and how, although William Wycherly had been very successful in business, he gave it up for his wife's sake and devoted himself to the management of her property. They had only one child, the girl he had just met, and the meeting fired him with a great desire to do something that should in some small way establish even the faintest claim of kinship with these people. He wrote one letter and tore it up. He wrote another and posted it.

. . . . . .

Mr. and Mrs. William Wycherly were sitting at breakfast and reading their letters. It was the day after that on which Herrick had gone to London, and Mrs. Wycherly was reading the child's letter aloud. The conclusion was as follows: "I met such a nice new cousin going up, Montagu Wycherly; he knew grannie and you, mother, long ago, and we saw him that time we went to Oxford, but he looks quite grown-up now; so is his brother, I expect. I wish we had known him sooner, but he is going to India in a week, which is a pity, for I like him. I have asked him to come and see us whenever he comes back, but I fear

that won't be for a long time. Miss Grant liked him too; he has a nice straight nose, but looks very sad and lonely. I nearly kissed him good-bye, but I thought perhaps you wouldn't like it, you are so partickler about those things, dearest mother. We are going to the Lyceum to-morrow afternoon; I am so excited. I think being in London is great fun, but I do miss you. My new habit will be lovely, I think. Much love, dearest two, from your own Herrick."

"Now did you," Mrs. Wycherly asked, "did you ever know Herrick to go anywhere without meeting some kind gentleman or other who turned out to be either a distant relation or a great friend of some other great friend? It is quite surprising that she refrained from embracing the melancholy youth: however, that's something. But did you ever hear of such an expansive child before?"

"This time she's brought a whole library about our ears," groaned William. "Here, by this very post, is a letter from the nice new cousin with the straight nose, asking if I'd like him to leave old Uncle Montagu's books in my charge, as my daughter tells him I'm fond of books, and it seems such a pity some kinsman—I like 'kinsman'; they've evidently arranged a relationship between them—shouldn't have the use of them while he is in India."

"I thought surely she was safe enough with Miss Grant, of all people," his wife exclaimed. "How in the world can they have got so intimate in an hour and a half?"

"At the present moment," said William irrelevantly, "there are on this property five dogs, two hedgehogs, innumerable rabbits, pigeons, doves and other birds, a pony and a ferret, all of them presents to Herrick since we came to live here. I'll go and fetch her my-

self when she comes home, or some one may be offering me a pack of hounds next. But seriously, what am I to say about the books? He writes a good letter—a very good letter—and it does seem a pity . . . but of course the thing's absurd. What does he know of me, or I of him?"

Mrs. Wycherly smiled. Their library was large and by no means full, and—William would assuredly be doing a kindness to this lonely boy. "After all, we do know something about him," she said, "at least, I do. Before I was married we lived in the same village, and his aunt, Miss Bethune—oh, the dearest old lady!—is one of my earliest recollections. Those boys were her great-nephews. They were left orphans, without a penny, when Herrick's friend, 'the nice new cousin,' was about six, and the little one not two."

"I remember hearing my father inveigh against Uncle Montagu's injustice in adopting these boys instead of saving his money to leave to us. But upon my word I think he was quite right," William said thoughtfully. "From what you have told me, and from lots that I have heard from other sources, old Miss Bethune seems to have been wonderfully good to my uncle. It must have been a queer household!"

"I believe that your uncle had lived with Miss Bethune as a sort of paying guest years before the children appeared upon the scene."

"Ah!" William exclaimed, "well do I remember hearing scraps of conversation about Uncle Montagu —to me a wholly vague personality, for I had never seen him—having given up his fellowship and gone to live in Scotland with some dear old lady because he was quite incapable of looking after himself; and

that she saw to it that he didn't forget his meals, and generally took care of him."

"When the children came the position was entirely reversed," said Margaret, smiling as at some pleasant recollection. "He woke up, and looked after the whole household, arranged everything for Miss Bethune, and after her death (she was seventy when she undertook those children) he educated them, and treated them exactly as if they were his own sons; and he went back to live in Oxford then."

William was silent for a minute, and sat meditatively drumming his fingers upon the table. Presently he remarked, half regretfully, "Of course, Herrick's new friend is no sort of relation to us."

"He was no sort of relation to your uncle, but that never seemed to occur to him, and he evidently considered that the upbringing of these two little boys was his most particular business. I really think he was as dear and charming in his way as Miss Bethune was in hers."

"It's a queer coincidence, this boy's second meeting with Herrick," William said thoughtfully. "Upon my word, I don't know what we ought to do—about those books now?"

"Why not wire and ask this boy to come down for the night and talk it over?" Margaret suggested; "then you would know what he is like, and whether you'd care for the responsibility, and he would see the place. On the whole, in spite of Herrick, I think it is rather a sensible proposal on his part. I confess I'd like to see him again myself; he was such a queer, solemn little boy, always with those two dear old people—such a curious bringing up! Do ask him down, William."

So the telegram was sent, and the very next after-

noon Montagu came down to Bredon to make acquaintance with Herrick's father and to renew his acquaintance with her mother.

The matter of the books was arranged very speedily and with mutual gratification. They were to be valued, insured against accident, and Montagu, his banker, and William were each to keep a copy of the catalogue. Montagu was immensely pleased that his guardian's books should be housed in such seemly and pleasant surroundings, and showed his satisfaction so frankly and boyishly that William and his wife were rather touched by his naïf pleasure, and it made their welcome of him more intimate and kindly than perhaps they realised.

He had to leave by a morning train, and as it was William's day on the bench, Margaret volunteered to take him for a walk and show him the grounds after breakfast.

All his life Montagu will remember that walk with Margaret Wycherly. He had known few women of her age: that age well past the uncertainty and crudity of girlhood, without in the least encroaching on the humdrum or monotonous, which in some women is so singularly gracious and approachable. Margaret wore her five-and-thirty years with that indescribable air of dignified matronhood which is so infinitely more attractive than any constant clutching at a surely vanishing youth. She had not the smallest desire to be considered younger than she was, with the result that no one ever thought about her age at all; they thought about her, which was much more interesting.

The first frost silvered the grass and a light mist lay over the distant fields, but the purple ploughland of the Cotswold Hills caught every gleam of wintry sunshine and held it, making the landscape kind-

looking and warm. The curious pungent smell of trodden beech leaves was borne on every breath of the fresh, cold wind, but the big trees in the avenue were still all glorious in their autumn dress of crimson and gold and brown.

"The dear Cotswold country," as Herrick called it, looked very pleasant and friendly to Montagu, the sense of Margaret's companionship was very sweet to him, and as they stopped in the big, square stable yard to admire Herrick's *colombier,* copied in miniature from the one in the Manoir d'Ango, the young man turned a radiant face to his hostess, exclaiming, "This *is* a jolly place, Mrs. Wycherly! I am glad to have seen it before I go."

Margaret laughed. "We are getting very fond of it," she said. "I quite look forward to the winter here. My first was disastrous; I was very ill, in bed nearly all the time. Then last winter William was nervous and took us to the South of France from November till April, so that this will be practically my first here. Herrick is to go to school after Christmas, not far away, but still it will make a great change in our lives. Do you know, I am ever so grateful to you for leaving Uncle Montagu's books and manuscripts with my husband. They will be a great interest to him, and he will miss Herrick so much, that I am glad of anything to take up his time. I'm sure they will be quite safe, and I'll report on their welfare to you every six months or so."

"Will you? Will you really?" Montagu said eagerly. "You don't know how I should value a letter. There's no one to write to me from home except my old house-master at Winchester, and Jane-Anne just occasionally. She's the girl who lived with us, you know. My brother's ship is in the China Seas,

and at the best of times he's a poor hand at letter-writing. It would be so very good of you."

"Then I shall certainly write," said Margaret. "You must pretend I'm a sort of aunt, and, mind, you must write, too; I shall expect to hear all about you."

"You see," said Montagu shyly, "all the other men going out will leave people of their own. My dear guardian died just six months before my final exam., and there was no one to be glad for me when I passed. My house-master sent me a telegram and some of the dons wrote, but it wasn't the same thing——" He stopped, for Margaret had made an odd little sound, and he looked at her to find that her eyes were full of tears. "Oh, please," he exclaimed in horrified self-reproach, "I never meant to be dismal or complaining; it was only that I wanted you to know how very kind, how really awfully kind it will be of you to write sometimes."

Margaret slipped her hand under his arm. "Come," she said; "we'll go and see the horses," and Montagu had lived long enough in Scotland to understand perfectly what she meant.

She drove him to the station herself, and compassed him about with a cordiality that left him warmed and comforted and inexpressibly cheered.

"I like Herrick's Knight of the Rueful Countenance exceedingly," said William Wycherly that night, as he sat sipping his port while the devoted Margaret peeled his walnuts. "She's right, though; he does look too grave and sad for a young chap."

"He looks very delicate," Margaret said anxiously. "I wonder if he's strong enough for India?"

"Oh, I think he's strong enough, but he's been through a pretty bad time lately, and it has left its

mark. I didn't know till he told me that Uncle Montagu died quite suddenly, sitting at his writing table with his notes on the *Nikomachean Ethics* in front of him. The housekeeper took in his cup of tea at four as usual, and went to fetch it away about an hour afterwards, when she found he had not touched it. There was nothing surprising in that, as it seems he constantly forgot his meals if he was not reminded to take them. The housekeeper asked if she should make him another cup of tea, and getting no answer, went forward to the writing table and found him apparently stooping over the table. But there was something in his attitude that alarmed her. She rang the bell for the young girl who helped her in the house, and together they lifted him on to the sofa. The maid flew for the doctor and for Montagu, who was on the river—it was in the Easter vacation—but when they both arrived there was nothing to be done: he had been dead some hours. The doctor had known for many years that Uncle Montagu's heart was weak, and Montagu, too, had an inkling of the state of affairs, but of course it was a terrible shock to the boy, who was working very hard for his final, and it gave him a great deal to do and to see to, with all his own work as well."

"Did old Mr. Wycherly leave a will?" Margaret asked.

"Oh yes, the boy told me about it all very simply. Uncle Montagu left the minutest directions about everything that concerned the boys. What money there is is divided between them, with a small legacy to his housekeeper's niece whom he had educated—a clever girl, now doing well on the stage, I believe. But he left all his books and manuscripts and furniture to Montagu. One of the lecturers at the new

schools took the house furnished for five years, so *that* saved him some trouble. It was very plainly furnished, mostly with things from the little house in Scotland."

"I remember that little house," Margaret said musingly; "it seems so strange to come across that boy again after all these years—did he say anything about his brother?"

"A good deal. He speaks of him with a kind of admirative amusement that is rather quaint. I gather, rather from what he did not say than what he did, that the brother is a bit extravagant and go-ahead."

"Surely he can't spend much on board ship?"

"He is not always on board ship, and he is very charming and good-looking, according to the rueful one, and has perhaps every incentive to go the pace. Not that he said anything of the kind, but he seemed to me to protest too much as to the other's sterling qualities. It's my belief that the younger one will get the lion's share of Uncle Montagu's money in the long run."

"Oh, well, he'll be the worst off; a naval officer gets poor pay compared to an Indian Civilian. Montagu will be quite rich for a bachelor—but I hope he won't be a bachelor for long. Now *his* is a case where marriage would be a really good thing."

"He's sure to get married out there," said William easily. "He strikes me as an unselfish sort of fellow. It seems to be such a comfort to him that he was able to live with Uncle Montagu at the house in Holywell Street for his last two years, and could look after him a bit. He managed all his work for the Indian Civil at Oxford; never had a crammer or anything of that sort. Of course, he took a brilliant degree. I remember noticing his name in the lists two years ago. He

suggests that I should undertake the arrangement of Uncle Montagu's notes on the *Ethics* for the press. He is quite determined that it must be done, and of course he can't possibly undertake it himself just now. It would be a big business, but I might find time——"

"I am sure," Margaret cried eagerly, "he couldn't have hit on a better person. *Do,* Will; your uncle's book too. After Christmas, when Herrick has gone to school—I should love you to do it."

William smiled the complacent smile of men whose wives whole-heartedly admire them. "I'll consider it, anyway, when I've seen the manuscripts," he said graciously. "I'm glad he came; I think he's a good fellow, even if he is a bit of a Monsieur Gravairs."

"They used to call Henry Esmond that," said Margaret.

[redacted]

PART I

CHAPTER I

AT KHAFADIA

"They haunt the silence of the breast,
Imaginations calm and fair."
In Memoriam.

"I AM disappointed with India and Anglo-Indians," said Mrs. Reeve. "At home one dreams of something so different to the reality. The glamour of the East on paper is a totally different thing to the glare of the East on its soil."

"Were you disappointed when you first came out?" asked Montagu, in the deferential tone he always used towards Mrs. Reeve, "or do you think it is because you have got used to things, are perhaps a little tired and run down—or homesick?" he added, after a moment's pause.

"No; it's not that. Of course, one is always homesick. But I have felt what I describe from the very first. It is my misfortune to be of a very critical temperament, to analyse my emotions . . . to make sure, and I cannot pretend to myself to feel an enthusiasm that I do not really feel."

Mrs. Reeve sighed and cast down her eyes. She was well aware that her eyelashes were unusually long and curly, and that the eyelashes were finer than

the eyes they hid; therefore were the eyelashes much more in evidence than the eyes, which were large and light-coloured and a little lacking in expression, albeit of an excellent shape and beautifully set under the broad white forehead framed by fair wavy hair most admirably dressed.

"It would, of course, be very difficult to pretend to oneself," Montagu said meditatively, "but I confess that for me the glamour of the East has never wholly faded, and I've been here over five years. One gets used to things, of course, and life is pretty monotonous sometimes, when one spends day after day in a stifling court listening to never-ending and wholly contradictory evidence: but that's only a bit of India. I gather it's the British element that you find so disappointing, not the native, or the country?"

"It's six years since I first came out," Mrs. Reeve said, laying her very white hand on the arm of Montagu's chair and leaning towards him as though she had something confidential to impart, "and I assure you, Mr. Wycherly, that every day of those years (of course, I was home for one of them; no one could stand five years on end in India) has only confirmed me in my opinion that life here is one gigantic pretence. We pretend we are happy; we pretend we enjoy things; we pretend we like people with whom we would never spend five minutes if we could choose our society instead of having it forced upon us——"

Here Mrs. Reeve happened to look at Montagu, and found that hard-working official regarding her with considerable astonishment, not unmixed with dismay. "Ah," she cried impatiently, "why do I say all this to you? Why did I for one little moment imagine that you would understand me—would sympathise? You *are* sympathetic, you know, or you could never have

broken down the barrier of extreme reserve that stands between me and most people. I thought that perhaps you, Mr. Wycherly, of all people, would know what it is to feel alone."

Montagu looked longingly at the pretty white hand lying so temptingly near his; but he thrust his own brown fists deep into his pockets and rose from his seat, saying gently:

"You are depressed and tired. I think I understand, I do really; and yet, here have I been boring you for the last hour when you might have been resting, and you've all those people coming to-night. I'm an ass——"

"Stop," Mrs. Reeve said, again flinging him the upward glance that Montagu had learned to love and dread. "You know you never bore me . . . and it is such ages since we have had a real long talk. Sit down again."

"You'd be far better to rest," Montagu began feebly, sitting down even as he spoke. "Shall I read to you? —that would tire you less than talking."

"No—talk to me; tell me, do *you* never feel sick to death of the people here—utterly bored by their everlasting talk of shop and departments and who has got what, and the Viceroy's latest extraordinary interference? I'm thankful that I am going home before the hot weather, or I think I should go out of my mind."

"You see," said Montagu apologetically, "if we do talk shop, it's *our* shop, and one's own shop is always interesting to oneself—but I dare say ladies find it very dull sometimes. Now to-night, for instance, I'll set a guard upon my tongue——"

Montagu's statement of his virtuous resolve was interrupted by a small boy in a dirty sailor suit, who

parted the curtains of the doorway and stood just within them holding a toy tin cab in his hands and asking, in a beseeching voice, "Wychelly Sahib, do you think *you* could mend it? One wheel is comed right off."

"Roger," said Mrs. Reeve—and the voice that had been so piteous and so full of melancholy cadences a moment before was sharp and almost strident with reproof, "what are you doing here? This is not your time to come down; run away at once."

Roger took not the slightest notice of the maternal command, but came a little further into the room. "Wychelly Sahib," he began again, just as if he hadn't heard, "*do* you think you could mend it?"

"Bring it here, sonnie, and I'll try," Montagu said, looking imploringly at Mrs. Reeve—she couldn't really be angry with the child; but Mrs. Reeve did not look at him. Her eyes, bent as before, were fixed on the point of her very pretty shoe, and she tapped the floor impatiently.

"Dad would mend it," the little boy went on, addressing himself exclusively to Montagu, "but he won't be back till to-night, and ven vere's a pahty, and ve wheels comed right off and I'm afraid he won't have time, and I do want it so. Oh! Wychelly Sahib, *do* you think you could mend it?"

Roger's question was like the refrain of a song—it was bound to recur over and over again, till the end should come in the shape of some solacing hope of rehabilitation for the hansom.

"I'll take it home with me and see what can be done," Montagu said reassuringly, and as he spoke he lifted the forlorn little figure on to his knee. "I think that perhaps a little solder judiciously applied—my boy may be able to help us, he's a handy fellow—

will do it. And then when I come back to-night to dinner—I'll come a little early if mother will let me, and I'll go straight to your night nursery and bring the hansom with me—will that do? Or do you think you'll be asleep?"

"Oh, Wychelly Sahib dear, you *do* think you can mend it!" Roger chanted ecstatically, and, throwing his arms round Montagu's neck, he proceeded to rumple him generally, and scratched his ear with the hansom in an ardent embrace. Then the child got down, and without another word trotted out of the room, leaving the broken toy on Montagu's knees.

Still Mrs. Reeve did not speak, and the silence was a thought oppressive.

Montagu put the little cab into his pocket and got up, saying rather nervously, "I really think I'd better be going. If the hansom is to be in working order before eight o'clock I'll need to see about it at once. Promise me that you will rest."

Mrs. Reeve got up, very slowly, very gracefully, with infinite languor in every melancholy movement. "Of course, if you wish to go I would be the last to keep you," she said with great dignity.

"You know I don't want to go," Montagu pleaded, "but you told me you had a headache——"

"Good-bye, Mr. Wycherly."

"Surely *au revoir,* seeing that you have been kind enough to ask me to dinner."

For one brief moment Mrs. Reeve lifted her eyes to his face, then the long lashes veiled them again and she smiled. But she did not offer to shake hands, although Montagu held out his. He crossed the room a little blindly (for this woman's favour had grown very precious to him of late), and as he did so stumbled against an inlaid table and knocked off a book

that was lying among the pretty silver knickknacks upon it. He stooped to pick up the book, remarking, "How pretty! I do hope I haven't hurt it—that stamped leather is charming; is it new? I don't remember to have seen it."

"It came from a friend at home by yesterday's mail —'Herrick's Love Songs,' do you know them? They seem rather sweet."

Montagu put the book down hastily. "Oh yes, I know them well," he said, and without another word he went out of the room and out of the house.

The bungalow that he shared with the Assistant Superintendent of Police was not ten minutes' walk from that of Roger's father; but during that ten minutes Montagu did a deal of thinking. "Herrick"—name, for him, charged with such soft and fragrant memories.

Kind little girl! so frank and friendly so fresh and simple, so transparently "well-hearted" towards all the world.

Montagu was acutely conscious of an absurd inclination to compare her with Cynthia Reeve. Herrick would have taken the deepest interest in little Roger's broken hansom. Why did Cynthia always seem so curiously hard and uninterested where the child was concerned? He was sure that it was only a pose, the simulated coldness of a nature so reserved as to render expression of deep feeling impossible. Yet the little scene in Mrs. Reeve's drawing-room had hurt Montagu. "To love children, to be gentle with them, was an instinct rather than a virtue" with him, even as with that great and noble character of whom he had reminded Margaret Wycherly by some fancied resemblance.

From Herrick, his thoughts turned naturally to her

mother: that kind and gracious lady who had so faithfully kept the promise made to the lonely stranger within her gates five years before.

Again the unconscious comparison, the same conclusion. From Margaret, set in a special niche on the altar of memory, whereon the sacred lamp is ever burning, he turned to yet another of the women he had known. This time there was no comparison. The tiny, white-haired figure, beneficently old, stood quite alone, conspicuous, central, in the warm golden light that shines—nor ever fades nor changes—on the mental pictures of those whom we have loved as little children. As in a vision Montagu saw his old aunt seated in her straight-backed chair, that chair covered with black horsehair, so cold and slippery when in contact with small bare legs.

No, she was not alone. Somebody stood at her side, somebody infantile and eager, but blurred and faint. What Montagu saw was the quick movement of his aunt's thin hands—old, large-veined hands—to the horn spectacle-case hanging at her waist, the speedy settling of gold-rimmed glasses on her high-bridged, delicately modelled nose, and the grave, interested inspection of legless horse or sailless windmill; and then came the comforting, cheering words, "Hoot, laddie, there's no very serious damage. Away with you and ask Elsa to put the glue-pot on the fire!"

Verily kindness shown to little children is put out at usury. Which of us ever forgets one who was good to us in that wide-eyed, strenuous time when every sorrow is so engulfing, every joy so all-sufficing! And those who remember best are the most eager to make payment in the only possible way—the passing on of patience and sympathy to other little

children, whose small feet patter in such pathetic fearlessness down those unexplored passages of life that haply hold so many unexpected griefs.

Yes, his aunt would undoubtedly have been deeply interested in Roger's broken toy. And the child had never even asked his mother to look at it. As a drowning man clutches at a straw, so Montagu snatched at this as the cause of Cynthia's strange lack of sympathy. She was pained that her little son should have asked a stranger to help him instead of going straight to her. Of course that was it. Montagu squared his shoulders, determined to dismiss the trivial incident from his mind. He stretched out his arms as one who sets down a heavy burden, and letting them fall again, one hand struck the pocket all bulging with the crippled hansom cab.

CHAPTER II

ROGER

"All round the house is the jet-black night;
It stares through the window-pane;
It crawls through the corners, hiding from the light,
And it moves with the moving flame."

R. L. S.

ROGER lay in his little bed waiting for "Wychelly Sahib" and the hansom cab. Kind, dusky hands had tucked him in; a benevolent brown face had bent over him, and Mongolo, his ayah, drew the mosquito curtains round his cot, and at his express command left him to await his guest in solitary state.

His mother's maid, Bennett, she who waved and dressed Mrs. Reeve's wonderful, burnished hair, and manicured the white hands adorned with so many rings, had rushed in for a moment to hear Roger repeat "Now I'll ay me" in a whispered sing-song he reserved for this, his sole religious exercise.

From Bennett he had gathered such confused ideas as he possessed of the mysterious Being whom he nightly adjured to keep or take that unknown quantity, his soul.

It pleased Bennett that he should do this, and he was quite willing to oblige her, for she was a kind and good-natured young woman, ranking only second in his affections of the women that he knew. Mongolo came easily first, for she was there always—her arms a sure haven for a tired or lonely little boy, her

breast the softest, safest pillow, with no sharp surprises in the shape of unexpected pins to scratch a tear-stained cheek, such as he had sometimes encountered in the well-meant embraces of Bennett.

To Roger it seemed quite natural and right that one's father should be large, and strong, and gentle, not very handsome or resplendent, extremely indulgent, affectionate, and patient, the most perfect companion in the world when obtainable; that one's mother should be a beautiful and distant being, invariably arrayed in garments of so delicate a description that the near approach of a small boy whose touch might sully their immaculate daintiness was to be discouraged. He never expected any sympathetic interest from his mother, and it is impossible to miss what one has never known.

Roger was not an unhappy child. In Khafadia he had innumerable friends, and his outlook had been one of untarnished brightness until a dark shadow—distant, it is true, and undefined, but there, nevertheless—was cast by certain rumours that reached him that he and his mother were going Home. "Home" to Roger was a desolate region unpeopled by the amiable and obsequious native servants who loved him; where long, dreary days were spent between four walls, days unenlivened by any kindly young sahibs who played soldiers, sang cheerful songs with choruses, and sometimes even did conjuring tricks; and, worst of all, where there was no tall, red-haired father who, even if he was during many hours of the day invisible owing to the call upon him made by that enigmatical hidden force called the Government of India, was yet there—solacing, safe, and certain as the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

In "Wychelly Sahib" Roger had discovered a new

talent. He could tell stories—enchanting stories of long-ago people whose names to Roger, accustomed as he was to the sonorous Eastern titles of his father's household, were less bewildering than to the average English child. In fact, of late Wychelly Sahib had become for Roger a stimulating sort of serial story, to be devoured whenever they happened to meet.

"I wish I'd 'membered to tell him to come early, very early," Roger was saying to himself; "then he could have told me a bit more about that Pershus."

There was a step in the passage; Roger sat up in bed and watched the curtains of the doorway. The step had assuredly paused outside. The curtains parted the least little bit down near the floor, and into the room across the polished boards, till it was stopped with a jerk by the rug before Roger's cot, there careered gaily the rehabilitated hansom cab.

"Come in, come in, my dear!" Roger squealed in ecstasy; "come in and give it to me in my own hands."

Montagu did as he was bid.

"Now," said Roger, when he had duly gloated over his cab, "pull up a chair, sit on it, and tell me some more about Pershus."

There was another step in the passage, a step accompanied by much rustling, and Mrs. Reeve, resplendent in a dress of shimmering silvery white, swept into the nursery, followed by her husband. She nodded carelessly to Montagu, and stood still in the middle of the room, while the little boy in the cot gazed at her with astonished and admiring eyes.

"I knew that Roger would keep awake till you came," she said, smiling at Montagu—she had a charming smile, that lit up and transfigured her whole face, but she smiled seldom, lest too great indulgence in this

form of urbanity should produce crow's-feet—"and I thought he'd like to see me in my dinner dress."

But Roger, after his first quick glance, was looking beyond his mother at the tall, bent, weary-looking man behind her, and held out his arms, exclaiming joyously, "Come and take me, come and take me, my dear, dear dad; I haven't seen you all day."

The Commissioner of Khafadia drew back the mosquito curtains and lifted his little son out of his cot.

"Don't you think," he said, "that mother looks very nice?"

Again Roger looked gravely at his mother. The soft lamplight fell on the radiant figure, a hundred tongues of flame scintillated from the jewels on her bosom and in her hair. The little boy, from the safe vantage-ground of his father's arms, put out a small tentative finger and touched his mother's bare shoulder as if to assure himself that the vision was real. "She's very pretty," he said earnestly; "she's like a queen or something. Oh, she *is* a burra mem, isn't she?"

Again Cynthia Reeve smiled the gracious, gratified smile that transfigured her face, and this time it was on her little son that she smiled. Admiration was as the breath of her nostrils. "Really," she said, "I shall get quite vain if every one pays me such compliments. Do you disapprove of my gown, Mr. Wycherly, that you are so silent?"

"You expect too much of us, if you expect us to notice the gown," said Montagu with a little bow.

"Come, we must go into the drawing-room," said Cynthia, only half-satisfied with the implied compliment. Had Montagu as he followed her to the drawing-room quoted aloud the lines running in his head,

"Large, lovely arms, and a neck like a tower," she would have been better pleased.

Subtleties annoyed her. She did not always understand them, and suspected remarks that she did not understand of having some adverse significance.

The Commissioner of Khafadia put his little boy to bed again, kissed him, and blessed him, and left Roger to dream pleasantly that his mother, gorgeously arrayed, was seated inside his hansom, and that he was driving her to the club.

CHAPTER III

A BURRA MEM

"Mes amis, ne méprisons personne. Le mépris est la ressource des parvenus, des poseurs, des laiderons et des sots, le masque où s'abrite la nullité, quelque fois la grédinerie, et qui dispense d'esprit, de jugement, de bonté."

Tartarin.

CYNTHIA REEVE was one of those rare persons who might be said to have attained very nearly to their ideal.

Of course, a great deal depends on the ideal. In Cynthia's case the conception was a little vague, and, like the ideals of most of us, compounded of several attributes. The chief of these was to be beautiful, and that people should acknowledge she was beautiful. These, she undoubtedly had attained. The rest was rather less definite, but might be expressed in a desire that the general public should in addition look upon her as proud, haughty, reserved, dignified.

As regards the first three characteristics her aspirations were abundantly fulfilled: but there are those who consider that dignity of manner is only compatible with absolute sincerity and simplicity, and here Cynthia failed.

It is one thing to go through life with your nose in the air, convinced of your superiority to more common mortals. It is quite another to convince these ordinary beings that such superiority does exist.

Cynthia's views of life were largely coloured by

the reflections and impressions given to the world in the novels dealing with fashionable life. Her great ambition was to be considered smart and inscrutable: a woman in whom the wells of tenderness were frozen by the chill winds of incompatibility; in whom such wells would remain frozen until perchance some flame of uncontrollable passion should melt the ice of her reserve, and the one man in the world should step into her life. Cynthia should not have said "step," it suggests the shop-walker; but she did, and if the metaphors are somewhat mixed it is Cynthia's fault. She had not studied the laws of composition, nor was the literature she most affected likely to improve her deficiencies in this respect. She read with care nearly every sixpenny "ladies' paper" that is published (anything under sixpence she stigmatised as "only fit for the servants' hall"), and there is no question that her researches in this particular field had made her past-mistress in the art of dress and the care of her person generally. She was at all times perfectly and suitably turned out; her complexion was faultless, her hands most carefully manicured; and it is to her credit that she always knew exactly the right time to appear in a simple toilet—an intuition by no means universal among women. She had absolutely no sense of humour, and naturally all sense of proportion was also lacking. She was one of those people who are fond of labels, and generally attach them to things they have not personally investigated. To Cynthia and her kind the works of Sir Walter Scott are stigmatised as "long-winded," those of Thackeray "cynical," while Dickens is "hopelessly vulgar"; not that they had read a whole book by either of these authors. Barrie "is so awfully Scotch, you know," and Rudyard Kipling "coarse." Cynthia felt a personal grudge against Mr.

Kipling, for on his works, such as "Under the Deodars," she had built the fabric of her vision of India before she came out; forgetting that in the preface to that very book he expressly warns his readers that "India is not entirely inhabited by men and women playing at tennis with the Seventh Commandment."

Cynthia, knowing that she was beautiful, came out to India fully expecting all manner of exciting adventures—adventures wherein she would play the part of *"La belle dame sans merci,"* while all the other women should be consumed by rage and jealousy at the wholesale defection of their husbands and particular friends.

So far no husband had defected. Many subalterns and junior Civilians had, it is true, been most attentive, for a pretty woman is a pretty woman whether she be stupid or witty, and man, especially young man, is mortal. But no one had required much keeping in order, and so far as defection went, it was Cynthia who occasionally saw, what she had considered her own particular following, desert to the more lively society of some young *Chotah-mem* just out from home, who adored her husband, played tennis, and rode with the boys in a spirit of good-comradeship devoid of every trace of sentiment, gave them good advice as well as dances, and was heartily liked for her possession of the very qualities in whose existence Cynthia affected disbelief.

But if it was her desire to be disliked by other women she certainly achieved it. The group of rather worn-looking *mem-sahibs,* with the vivacious manners and the wistful eyes, that she found at the station when she first went out were quite willing to take her into their midst and be kind to her, with the ready

friendliness and inexhaustible hospitality of the Anglo-Indian.

To their immense surprise, to the amusement of those with a sense of humour and the indignation of those without, this girl fresh from home tried to patronise them because her husband was Commissioner.

By her manner to other women she registered with the accuracy of a thermometer her opinion of their social importance, with the inevitable result that the other women exclaimed in chorus, "Who on earth *was* she?"

O, unwise Cynthia!

The inhabitants of that station, men and women alike, found Mrs. Reeve singularly uncommunicative as to her antecedents. She was fond of saying she was "the last of her line," but did not state precisely what noble family culminated in her person.

It is true that she signed herself "Cynthia de Lisle Reeve," which gave the impression that perhaps "de Lisle" was a family name. Cynthia's second name was "de Lisle"—but alas! her surname, before she changed it for the unromantic one of Reeve, had been Higgs.

Cynthia's parents both died while she was a very small child, and she was brought up by her paternal grandfather, Benjamin Higgs, a worthy and well-to-do tobacconist in the city of Bristol. He had several shops, not only in Bristol but all over the country. He also had several children, and Cynthia was the only child of his youngest son, a young man whose span of life was considerably shortened by excesses in various directions. Her mother had been a pretty little milliner of romantic tendencies—hence the name, "Cynthia de Lisle."

The worthy Benjamin and Susan, his wife, were

devoted to their orphan grandchild; and Benjamin, on retiring from business, having attained to a comfortable competence, took what he called a "snug little 'ouse and grounds" in Clifton. He sent his beautiful granddaughter to a would-be-fashionable boarding school, where most of the girls were from the same class as she was herself, where she learnt much that was useless and nothing that could in any way raise her mental or moral standard. When she left school and "came out," as all maidens of whatever rank put it nowadays, she had several proposals from young men whom she had met at dances or at the houses of her friends. But Cynthia refused them all. Quite early in her maidenhood she had determined that she was not going to marry into business circles. The "County" had for her an irresistible attraction; she fully determined that whomsoever she should marry should be able to give her "social position." To this end she was staid and quiet in manner, singularly subdued and tasteful in her dress, cultivating by every power within her "the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere," with, it must be confessed, considerable success.

Roger Reeve, of the Indian Civil Service, home on leave, was staying with friends near Bristol. A parliamentary election was "in the air," and his host, having several axes to grind at the time, took his guests to the Mayor's Ball. Here Roger was introduced to Cynthia.

Her beauty, her still composure, her rare smile, charmed him from the first moment. He fell honestly and desperately in love with her. That she should be silent because she had nothing to say never occurred to him. He wasn't a talkative man himself. Besides, men as a rule almost always prefer to talk

to a woman if she be beautiful to look upon, than to listen to the wittiest woman in creation if she be plain—for a while. Nothing lasts in this world except strong affection, and even that sometimes gets worn rather threadbare if there be not mutual understanding and sympathy to strengthen it. In two months from their meeting at the Mayor's ball, Cynthia de Lisle Higgs became Mrs. Roger Reeve, with the blessing of her grandfather, who, honest man, liked and trusted the other honest man to whom he had given his well-loved grandchild. She was not, and never had been, in the smallest degree in love with her husband, but he had appeared at a psychological moment when Cynthia was beginning to be a little anxious as to how she was to emerge from the comfortable middle-class environment in which she had been born and from which she saw no immediate prospect of extricating herself. The man was plain, rather silent, manifestly well-bred. He lived on terms of easy intimacy with those great beings generically known to Cynthia and her set as the "County." Here was a way made plain, with the lamp of social position shining at the end of it. Cynthia promptly followed the gleam.

CHAPTER IV

THE STATE OF DENMARK

"Strange eclipse, when the hue of truth comes shadowing over our bright ideal planet. It will not seem the planet's fault, but truth's. Reality is the offender; delusion, our treasure that we are robbed of."

The Egoist.

MONTAGU was happy in India. He liked his work and his colleagues, and they generally liked him. The older men, because he was modest, deferent in manner, unanxious to give his opinion; the youngsters, because he was, as they put it, "a good sort without any side."

In externals he differed very little from the rest of the batch of young Britons, product of English Public Schools and Universities, who year after year go out to take up the white man's burden and to serve their King in peaceful ways in his Empire beyond the seas. He was slight, thin, and rather fragile-looking, with a wide forehead and thoughtful eyes; very quiet in manner, but free from awkwardness or shyness of any kind. Without being good at games, he could take part in most of them with modest success. He was a good shot, and rode and fenced well.

When he was sent to Khafadia he rejoiced exceedingly, for it was a big station, extremely healthy; moreover, Reeve, as Commissioner, had the reputation of being a first-class official and very keen. Montagu was thoroughly interested in his work, but he

was glad to exchange a small and lonely station for one where there was greater variety of human intercourse; besides, his leave was due in the autumn and he had arranged with his brother that they would meet and spend some part of it together among the Cotswold Hills. His house-master at Winchester had just retired to a living some four miles from Bredon Manor, and it seemed to Montagu that in the Cotswolds were concentrated all those dear associations that go to the making of home.

Of course, he called on Mrs. Reeve soon after his arrival in Khafadia and was instantly and immensely struck by her beauty. It happened that early in his time there she came with her husband to his bungalow and was shown into his sitting-room to wait while Reeve interviewed him on business in his office. The room was unlike any man's room Mrs. Reeve had ever been in before. It was not that there were many books, some pictures of the usual sort, sporting prints, college arms, groups of undergraduates and so on, but that on the shelves and tables generally devoted to such mementoes there were no photographs of people, only miniatures—old, old miniatures.

Now it happened that Cynthia had been reading, an hour before, an article in "Comments for County Gentlewomen" on the subject of miniatures, and she at once came to the conclusion that this young man, who was so deferent in his manner, who looked at her with such undisguised admiration in his honest eyes, must undoubtedly be of good family—old family; therefore worth cultivating.

On his writing-table there was just one photograph, that of an exceedingly handsome boy in naval uniform. Not one portrait of a woman, and only two minia-

tures, both, Cynthia decided, of ladies of a very bygone time.

Cynthia's thoughts were somewhat as follows: "Rather nice boy, evidently aristocratic" (Reeve had vainly tried to get Cynthia to discard this dreadful word, but her vocabulary was not large and it was deeply rooted); "seems to have known no smart women; not a single signed photograph by Alice Hughes or any one. He admires me, might be useful!—I'll annex him before any of those cats get a look in. I hope they're really relations though, it would be an awful sell if he only collects." Before this chilling doubt could be fairly formulated, her husband came back accompanied by Montagu, to whom she turned, saying graciously, "I've been admiring the beautiful miniatures of your ancestors, Mr. Wycherly; it must be delightful to possess so many."

"They're not all my people," Montagu said modestly; "some of them belonged to my guardian. I sometimes feel as if I had no right to them, but none of his people seemed to want them, so I kept them. There are two or three Cosways among them, if you are interested in these things."

The Commissioner of Khafadia smiled grimly as his wife expressed her enthusiastic appreciation, but he made no comment, waited until his wife had finished, and then took her away. Montagu thought that he looked very old and sad, and that Mrs. Reeve looked very young and melancholy, and depression is much more interesting when it is accompanied by youth and good looks.

In the weeks that followed it happened somehow that Montagu saw a good deal of his Commissioner's wife, that she conveyed to him the impression, by her eloquent silences rather than by her conversation,

that she was misunderstood, and that her husband was a prosaic, departmental, dry-as-dust sort of person who did not even try to fathom her deep nature. When a woman's eyelashes are so very long and black and curly, it is only too plain to a sympathetic youth that her nature is equally rare and beautiful. The central niche in the reredos of his admirations was almost reserved for Mrs. Reeve when he got to be fond of little Roger, and then somehow the figure wouldn't fit.

He never spoke of her to any one else, or he might have heard a good deal that was enlightening. He was not even conscious that he was rapidly falling in love with her veiled eyes, the splendid sweep of her shoulders, her white hands with the pink, beautiful nails. He loved to see her move, for she walked well and held herself regally. He found immense pleasure in merely looking at her, just as when he was a little boy he had loved to look upon the beautiful clean-limbed figures in Flaxman's Theogony, and even as he had endowed those figures with whatever qualities he at the moment most esteemed, so he created for himself a Cynthia mysterious as Mona Lisa, solitary as the Sphinx, unique among women.

And all the time Cynthia was thinking that never had she come across so singular a young man. She was convinced that he adored her; why, he showed it in his face, and yet he had never so far said a word to her that might not have been shouted from the housetops. He had never so much as held her hand the very "little longer" which is surely a permissible expression of the most decorous devotion and . . . she had given him such heaps of opportunities.

She was so sure that he had never been in love before (here she was mistaken: Montagu was nearly twenty-eight years old and was by no means immune

from ordinary human frailties) and that she, herself, was "the first that ever burst into that silent sea"; nevertheless, the said sea manifested not the smallest perturbation, its surface appeared unruffled even to the eye of faith. It was in vain that she reassured herself with the repetition of such aphorisms as "Still waters run deep" or "There's no smoke without fire." Nothing happened. The moth undoubtedly fluttered round the candle, but his wings remained, apparently, unsinged.

No, he certainly was not playing the game. Cynthia began to feel almost as irritated with Montagu as she had felt with Mr. Kipling before she dismissed him as "coarse" to the limbo of unreadable authors.

She had no use for admiration that took no tangible form; the duffer did not even send her flowers.

CHAPTER V

THE LITTLE SOUL

"A paltry interest of the moment blinds it to public duty and private friendship. But you feel this lack of perspective most acutely when the little soul chances on a power to pain you greatly. Annoy it ever so slightly, ever so obviously without intent, and so that it vent its annoyance, it will spare no feeling of yours. Nay, even if the annoyance come to it from another quarter, should you be at hand to take punishment, make ready to receive it with what magnanimity you may: your wincing will be balm to the little soul, and you will see anon a complacent smile."

Quales Ego.

"I DO think that servants as a class are the most self-seeking and selfish of creatures. Would you believe it? Bennett has refused to go home with me before the hot weather. After my paying her passage out, and all. I do think it is infamous. She says she prefers India to England, and that now she is here she may as well stay the five years she came for. Of course, she'll get another place easily enough; any maid who is known to have dressed ME will. But isn't it odious of her? I suppose for the voyage I'll have to put up with some horrid little mission person, who may be able to look after Roger, but will certainly be of no earthly use to *me,* and I shall look a fright all the voyage. Why don't you answer? Don't you take any interest? Don't you think it's very odious of Bennett?"

Cynthia's beautiful calm was much ruffled. She sat forward in her chair, and tapped with her foot.

Reeve, deep in some famine statistics, laid down the papers and looked at his wife.

"I thought it was an understood thing she was to come out for five years?" he said wearily; "you've only been out two, and now you want to go home again: I've no objection, although you know I think you might have waited till next year, while we've got such a good station. It wouldn't have hurt Roger to stay here till next year; but as you've made up your mind to go, I can't see that you have any very great grievance against Bennett. If she should want to go home in the next two years she'll have to pay her own fare."

"Oh no, she wouldn't; she'd easily find some one who would be glad of her. She's a good sailor. That's where she's so selfish. She knows how dependent I am upon her."

"So long as you get somebody who can take proper care of the *baba*, I don't see that it will hurt you to do without a maid for a week or two," said Reeve brutally, and taking up his papers he began to read again.

"Always Roger!" Cynthia exclaimed bitterly; "you never think of me. I believe you are glad that Bennett has been so disagreeable: my comfort is, of course, of no importance."

Reeve looked at his wife over the top of his papers and sighed. "Somebody must think of Roger," he said wearily, then with considerable energy: "I wish to God you could leave the child here. But remember this, the first thing you do when you get home is to engage a thoroughly good governess for him. Then you can do what you like, go where you like, and enjoy yourself in your own way, so far as our means will afford, but on that understanding only."

Reeve got up from his chair and stood looking down at his beautiful wife. There was no love in the glance he cast upon her and much exasperation.

Cynthia saw that she had gone too far. Once or twice lately the patient husband had turned restive, always on the score of their little son.

"I cannot think," she said in an injured tone, "why you should always speak as though I were less interested in Roger's welfare than you are yourself. If I am less demonstrative towards my child than some of the excessively plain women you appear to admire so, it is not because I love him less. It is my way, that is all; I can't alter my character, even to oblige you."

"I suppose you can't," Reeve said gently, and left the room.

It is possible that if little Roger had been a girl, a pretty little girl, whose appearance lent itself to the setting of "sweet little muslin frocks" and floppy hats of ornate design, Cynthia might have been quite a fond and devoted parent. A child who looked well on the front seat of a carriage, who posed with her lovely young mother *à la* Madame le Brun, would have formed an entrancing frontispiece in one of the "sixpenny ladies' papers," and would have been a useful asset in the smart career on which Cynthia had embarked with such high seriousness.

Had Roger even been a pretty little boy, picturesque in appearance, of the "Fauntleroy" or "Bubbles" type, the sort of little boy much in request as a page at fashionable weddings, Cynthia would probably have been proud of him in quite an ordinary womanly way. But Roger was none of these things; an ugly little baby, he was growing up into an undeniably plain child, extremely like his father. No amount of dressing

could ever make Roger look in the least like a Gainsborough or a Reynolds. The more one dressed him the plainer he looked. It is true that his hair was of the then fashionable colour, a rather deep red, like the Commissioner's, but it was hopeless and unutterably straight; by no stretch of the imagination could one describe it as an "aureole," and of what earthly use is red hair if it doesn't look like an aureole? He was well built and fairly tall for his age; his eyes were kind and honest, with curly black lashes like his mother's; he was affectionate and plucky, and in spite of his homely little face bore himself with a certain quaint distinction. But these were things that did not appeal to Cynthia. She was not fond of children, and, as she told herself over and over again, it was not possible for her to care deeply for "the offspring of a loveless union." She had brought herself to believe that she had, for "family reasons," been forced into her marriage with the Commissioner of Khafadia, and she hinted as much to any one with whom she became at all intimate, always wondering at the lack of sympathy such persons usually manifested.

It never occurred to Cynthia that the "loveless union" was a bitter disappointment to her husband also. In her review of the situation his image did not come into the picture. She was a large woman, and her own figure thrown upon the screen of her imagination effectually blocked the space to the exclusion of everybody else.

For four years after their marriage Reeve had been wonderfully tender and patient with his wife. He made full allowance for the many disadvantages of her environment and education. He concealed his shudders when she talked of "swells" or "ladies and gentlemen," forestalling with the utmost delicacy and

gentleness all preventable social solecisms. Cynthia was, on the whole, a quick study; she saw which way salvation lay, and in those very early days had the grace to be grateful to her husband for his care of her. But as she grew more sure of herself, as she became accustomed to what at first had seemed so pleasantly impressive in her surroundings, her natural arrogance reasserted itself, and she began to patronise her husband's old friends in a fashion that caused Roger Reeve unspeakable agony.

For even this he could have found palliation; he had a sense of humour, and she was but young. But when the conviction was slowly but surely borne in upon him that she was indifferent to their boy, that to her the wonder and mystery and responsibility of motherhood made no appeal, then the spirit of her husband rose up in judgment of Cynthia Reeve. His brain, keen and remorseless, stripped her little soul of every flimsy garment of sentiment with which he had invested it, and the little soul of "little ambitions, little animosities, little revenges," stood shrivelled and naked and unashamed before him.

Life then held two things for the Commissioner of Khafadia—work and his little son.

With regard to his wife he felt like one who, uninstructed in lapidary lore, has staked his all on a gem that turns out to be the reverse of precious. The diamond had proved to be paste. It was of no avail to rail at the paste because it was no diamond.

Reeve was a just man. The fault was his, for in the first place endowing Cynthia with qualities she did not possess, not hers for not possessing them.

But he was unable to pretend any more. He was nearly always polite and amiable towards his wife, but she knew that he no longer idealised her, and the

knowledge irritated her extremely. If he would even have "run after" some other woman, it would have been a consolation to her as providing a grievance. But he did nothing of the kind. He was always very generous to her as regards money and seldom interfered with any of her amusements. But she was conscious that, except upon one subject, her opinion was utterly valueless to him. In one matter only had she even the power to hurt him. Cynthia early discovered that through little Roger she could most effectually "get at" her husband, and she was not slow to make use of her ability. Hence her determination to go home at a time when it was absolutely unnecessary and unexpected. She declared herself to be frightfully homesick—that even Simla could offer no balm to her wistful spirit, and, of course, Roger must go too.

So Cynthia smiled when her husband had left the room, and even Bennett's outrageous conduct was for the moment forgotten in the satisfaction she felt at having made him suffer.

Bennett had no difficulty in obtaining another situation when Mrs. Reeve went home that spring. She managed to secure service with a very great lady indeed: a lady whose carriage was followed by gorgeous and jingly sowars, whose husband's arrivals and departures were celebrated by the firing of guns, whose favour was sought by all aspiring to important posts.

In spite of all this state and circumstance, Bennett found her new mistress by no means so unapproachable as she had found Mrs. Reeve.

"It isn't that she was a bad mistress," she said to a visitor's English maid, "it wasn't that made me so glad to get away, but a body never felt at 'ome with 'er. She sort of passed you by with 'er nose in the air always, dirt under 'er feet you seemed. She didn't

seem 'uman, somehow, with 'er pride and 'er silent sort of ways. O yes! she was uncommonly good-looking. She paid for dressing, that she did. It was all *there,* you know, plenty to go upon. 'Er hair was 'er own, and 'er figure and 'er complexion. To be sure she took mighty care of it. She'll be a 'andsome woman at fifty if she doesn't get fat."

"A bit inconsiderate, was she?" asked the other.

"No, I can't say that," said Bennett conscientiously; "it wasn't in the least a hard place and she didn't grudge wages or perquisites; but I wasn't a bit happy somehow, and after being out here with so much waiting on one, I didn't fancy going back 'ome just yet. I know, too, as I'd have had to do for Master Roger as well as for 'is mama."

"Didn't she keep a nurse for him?" asked the other.

"Oh, of course he had an *ayah,* but when he's at home I'm not so sure. Mrs. Reeve isn't the one to spend anything on Master Roger that can be helped. If any one goes without anything it'll be 'im, not *'er.* Mr. Reeve, he says this and that is to be done for Master Roger, and so it is out here, because he's there to see as it's done. But mark my words, when she's safe away it's little trouble she'll take about that poor child. He'd 'ave grown up a perfect 'eathen but for me. 'The 'eathen in 'is blindness.' I've often thought of that 'ymn when I was trying to teach Master Roger his prayers. A nice-spoken little gentleman he was, too, not at all a contrairy child."

"How funny she shouldn't be fond of her own child, and him the only one," the visiting maid said meditatively. "I must say, with all their faults, the ladies out here do love their children, *and* fret after them something dreadful."

"So they do, most of them," Bennett agreed, "but

Mrs. Reeve, she's a regular what you mid call fash'n-able lady, like a lady in a book, all for dress, and bridge, an' admiration, an' that. Very much admired she was, too, and no wonder. Well, I must go to my lady—she's worth dressing, too, mind you; though she is a bit stout and elderly, there's a air about 'er when she's really well turned out that does me credit, but of course she isn't a beauty, and never have been a beauty like Mrs. Reeve. But what I like about my present lady is, she takes a interest in you. Mail days she always says, 'I hope you've got good news from home, Bennett,' and one day, when no letter at all come—my father and mother's a bit slow with their pens at the best of times—she read me a piece out of a letter of her own, wrote by some lady who lives not far from the little town where my father 'as 'is shop—'air-dresser, 'e is, that's what gave me the taste—but only in a small way," she added with proud humility. "There's no one there as really *cares* about their 'air. Well, my lady, she read this out to me just to cheer me up, and I could 'a cried just to hear the names of the villages so familiar-like. I'll tell you what it is," said Bennett with great solemnity, "when a lady's a very great lady, she's not afraid to be simple just like ourselves. I don't know *'oo* Mrs. Reeve was, but I don't believe she was much, so there." And Bennett departed to adorn her mistress for dinner.

When she had finished dressing that lady's abundant grey hair, Bennett gave her the handglass that she might admire the result.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, as she surveyed her maid's handiwork; "that is really beautiful, but doesn't it look as if I wore a *toupé,* it's so perfect?"

"No, my lady," said Bennett earnestly, "it does not, not to one as looks into things. I haven't a word to

say against *toupés* when they're wore out of doors under a veil. They saves the hair, and keeps neat and tidy. But when it comes to a' evenin', and ladies and gentlemen's standing close together, and some of 'em wearing glasses, then I say a *toupé* looks a bit hard and unnatural. Your hair, my lady, just matches your skin; it's soft like, and any one can tell it's your own. After all," Bennett said piously, "there's no handiwork can match the Almighty's when 'E sets His mind to it."

PART II

CHAPTER VI

LORD DELAFOSSE

"Proud with the proud, yet courteously proud,
So as to make them feel he knew his station
And theirs:—without a struggle for priority
He neither brook'd nor claimed superiority."
Don Juan.

BREDON MANOR was a comparatively small house, and the whole property did not exceed some six hundred acres. But Bredon Delafosse was a great mansion, built at the Restoration, with lands extending over half a county. The present owner, Lord Delafosse, having ignored it for some forty years, suddenly returned about a year after the Wycherlys came to the Manor House. He announced to his friends that he had come back to die there.

Whether it was that the air of the Cotswold Hills is particularly salubrious, or that his lordship was less ill than he imagined, there appeared as yet no immediate prospect of the melancholy event he had considered so imminent. Save for occasional attacks of gout, varied by threatenings of heart failure, he really enjoyed excellent health for his time of life: and although of late years he had visited little and entertained less, his keen intellect was quite unimpaired.

The Manor House had belonged to his younger

brother, to whom Miss Margaret Carruthers had been engaged. This brother was killed out hunting a week before the day fixed for their marriage. Lord Delafosse was in India (where he held an important position in the Government) at the time this happened, and for years the house remained empty. At last his lordship ordered his agents to sell it, with the result that Miss Carruthers bought it, and so finally it came into the hands of its present owners.

It happened that one very stormy day Herrick, driving out from Marlehouse in her little pony cart with only her Scotch nurse, Janet, in attendance, overtook an old gentleman, overcoatless, umbrellaless, tramping along the muddy footpath which edged the road to Bredon.

"I'll offer him a lift," said Herrick, "he'll get most frightfully wet if he walks in this, and he's going our way."

"I shouldn't if I were you, miss," said the cautious Janet; "he looks a queer old body, and there's not a soul for miles. You're apt to make too free with strangers."

"Queer old people get just as wet as younger ones," her young mistress answered. "I'm sure mother would offer him a lift!"

So it came about that Herrick pulled up as she neared the old gentleman, calling out in her clear young voice: "May I offer you a seat, sir, and an umbrella? You seem to be going our way."

The queer old body, high coat-collar turned up to his ears, exclaimed, "Egad, young lady, you're exceedingly kind, and I'm vastly obliged to you."

He mounted somewhat stiffly into the little trap, was provided with a spare cloak and umbrella, Her-

rick hurried her pony, and off they went at a good pace.

The queer old body did not say much, but when Herrick looked at him she found his bright penetrating eyes fixed upon her. Not that this in the smallest degree confused her. She was accustomed to be looked at, and William Wycherly constantly praised his daughter to her face, so that, he said, she should not, when other men began to flatter her, find an agreeable novelty in the proceeding.

"I hope you won't get a bad cold," said this self-possessed small girl, with yellow curls bobbing under her crimson Tam-o'-Shanter. "I'm always afraid of grown-up people getting wet since last winter; my mother was most dreadfully ill, you know, and it was rain like this, only much, much colder. I hope you aren't cold?"

"Not at all, thank you," the stranger said, smiling: it was a long time since any one had spoken of him as a grown-up person. "I hope your mother's illness did not leave any ill effects."

"We're very nervous about her still," said Herrick, with, had she but known it, a perfect imitation of her grandmother's manner. "We have to take the greatest care of her, but she has not been ill like that again—oh, it was a dreadful time!" Herrick's eyes grew dark and tragic at the mere recollection, and nobody spoke for a few minutes. By this time they were nearing the great gates of Bredon Delafosse. Beautiful gates they were, traceried iron brought from Italy a hundred years before, with solid stone pillars surmounted by dragons holding the Earl's coat of arms.

"Might I ask you to drop me here?" asked the stranger.

"I'd better drive you up if you're going to the

house," said Herrick decidedly. "It's a long drive, and not much shelter except just at the beginning."

"But it is delaying you—pray allow me to descend here, and accept my warmest thanks."

"Gate!" shouted Herrick at the top of her voice. "Please sit still," she continued; "it won't delay me ten minutes, and"—the gates rolled back; a rather frightened looking lodge-keeper bobbed curtseys as they passed—"it's raining more than ever."

It was. It battered on trees, umbrellas, and the pony's steaming back. "I walked up here once with my dad," the little girl went on; "it's a beautiful old house outside—I'd like to see the inside, too, it's so big and grand. The old lord is coming back, you know; people are very much excited in the village; there's been no one here for such ages."

"And do you live in the neighbourhood, young lady?" asked the stranger, bending on her again his keen, amused glance.

"Quite near; we live in that grey house over there," pointing with her whip through the trees. "Ah, here we are! Now mind you change, 'specially boots, and feel if your socks are wet. I dare say some one would lend you some, if you've only come for a call."

"I dare say they will," said the old gentleman, with a grim smile.

As he prepared to get out, backwards and very carefully, the glass doors inside the stone portico were thrown back, and as Herrick afterwards described it to her mother, "A quite grandly dressed man rushed out with an open umbrella and stood waiting to help the queer old gentleman up the steps."

"I am immensely obliged to you, young lady," said the old man; "your kindness has made me feel that, even though I have been away for so long, there is yet

welcome for me. It will not be my fault if we do not meet again shortly." He lifted his dripping hat with a sweeping bow.

"Good-bye, and 'mind you change," Herrick called out again, as she turned the pony and trotted down the drive.

"Now who will that be, Miss Herrick?" asked Janet the cautious, as they turned into the road again. "He didn't look quite like a butler-body, or anything of that sort; and if he had been he would never have said he hoped to meet you again; a douce, pleasant-spoken man, too, in spite of his queer look."

"My dear Janet," said Herrick patronisingly, "he's probably a visitor, and we shall never see him again; old gentlemen always say those kind of things—to me."

Next day his lordship called in person at Bredon Manor to ask after his fair preserver. This time he was at least dry, but he looked just as odd. However, he was attracted by Margaret's gentle dignity, and confided to her that he had completely lost his heart to her daughter. He saw neither William nor Herrick, and in a few days the family at the Manor had departed for the winter to the South of France.

Lord Delafosse felt quite personally aggrieved, but found consolation in beginning to restore a ruined chapel on the estate.

When Lady Alicia heard of this pious enterprise she chuckled and quoted, "When the devil was sick." There were more than Lady Alicia who smiled at the anomaly, for Charles Deloraine Ellenhill, eleventh Earl of Delafosse, enjoyed, during a considerable portion of his career, a reputation the reverse of saintly.

When the Wycherlys came back to Bredon in the following spring they found the old lord established at Bredon Delafosse and the chapel begun. Two years

later the village and neighbourhood were greatly excited because a Semitic millionaire named Lowenbaum had bought an old freehold farm from a neighbouring landowner, and was building on the site thereof a lordly pleasure house for his own use.

Lord Delafosse was furious. The farm was not upon his land, but he could see it from his windows—some three miles off, it is true—and its grey simplicity had always harmonised with the surrounding country. The new building also came into the picture and, for his lordship, spoilt it.

Mr. Lowenbaum was apparently his own architect, for the building consisted of a most wonderful conglomeration of styles.

"Queen Anne, by Late Byzantine out of Gin Palace," Lord Delafosse called it in the sporting parlance of his youth. "A fine mansion, that a' be," said the villagers; while the tradesmen of Marlehouse openly rejoiced that so wealthy a possible customer should come to sojourn in their midst.

"Surrum Grange" (his lordship always called it Sodom) did not take nearly so long to build as the little church at Bredon Delafosse, and before Lord Delafosse had found the ancient painted glass he wanted for the windows, and suitable seats for the clergy with canopies of old oak, Surrum Grange was nearly completed, and the Lowenbaums declared their intention of coming there for "huntin' and shootin'," though what they were going to shoot seemed somewhat doubtful, as nearly all the shooting there was belonged to Lord Delafosse, and he declared his hospitable intention of filling his house with guests, and asking all the neighbourhood, except the Lowenbaums, to come and kill his pheasants.

His lordship liked Mr. and Mrs. Wycherly, he

greatly liked old Lady Alicia, who had known him in his wild youth and strongly disapproved of him, and he adored Herrick.

"Let me have my little share in that beautiful child," he besought Margaret when they came back to Bredon. "I'm a lonely old fellow, and there's little left in this world that I can enjoy. But you may trust me in this —she'll learn no harm from me, and it is just possible she may learn a little good. We of the old *régime* had at least good taste and good manners. *Every* girl has far too much freedom nowadays. You and her father are young people, and it will do Herrick no harm to consort occasionally with a slow-going old stager who would fain put the drag on."

So it came about that old Lord Delafosse had a considerable amount of say in the upbringing of Herrick. Of course he spoiled her outrageously, and heaped presents upon her to such an extent that Margaret remonstrated with real seriousness; but to small purpose: the old lord always waxed pathetic, and flaunted his loneliness and his age in her face, and Margaret, being tender-hearted, was fain to give way.

With regard to one matter, however, his interference, his supplication, his continual criticism were all in vain. When she had left school Margaret encouraged her daughter to take an active interest in the poor of their village. She went with her bright face and friendly manner in and out of the cottages, leaving mirth and good cheer behind her; she had a night class for rough lads, which was held in the Manor House once a week, and she taught them to carve, to draw, and on festive occasions to sing.

All this Lord Delafosse deprecated in the strongest terms. "Good God, madam! she might catch some loathsome disease in those stuffy little huts; how dare

you? I really say it seriously, how dare you expose our nymph of Bredon to any such risk? Are there no hard-favoured district visitors to do that sort of thing? Is money wanted? Let me set up a parish nurse—a deaconess, an army of district visitors—anything to prevent this. Think of it, I beg of you, think!"

Margaret shook her head a little sadly. "I have thought, Lord Delafosse, and it is just because she is bright and bonny and loving-hearted that she is of use. She has so much—youth and health and the happiest of surroundings; is she to give nothing in return for all this? It is not like you to suggest money as a possible panacea for everything."

"You're right, I suppose, in principle, dear madam," Lord Delafosse groaned, "but in practice . . . in practice it's a tempting of Providence that I can in no way countenance. Promise me this: if there should ever be an epidemic of any kind in the village, or even an isolated case of fever, you won't let her go?"

"Certainly I should not dream of letting her go. I don't *want* her to catch fever, I assure you."

"With that assurance, I suppose I must rest content. But you're wrong, I'm convinced you are wrong in this particular instance."

"And I," said Margaret, smiling at the old man, who really looked very worried, "am equally convinced that I am right, absolutely and entirely right; and in your heart of hearts you know it too."

"I know nothing of the kind," snapped the old lord, "and when we get a regular parson at Bredon, when my church is finished and my incumbent found, I hope you and Herrick both will leave the man to manage his parish for himself, and not interfere. Too much lay interference in parish affairs is always a mistake, always a mistake. You may take it from me that it is so."

CHAPTER VII

"RESPONSIBILITY"

"To be brave, handsome, twenty-two,
With nothing else on earth to do,
But all day long to bill and coo;
It were a pleasant calling."

W. M. THACKERAY.

HERRICK shut her book, and her eyes were full of tears. The book was Henry Harland's "Grey Roses," and the story she had been reading that poignant, pathetic sketch "Responsibility." For five minutes she sat quite still in the green bower she had chosen at the furthest point of her father's wood. The view was beautiful, for the wood crowned a steep declivity, whence rolled in undulating masses of green sward and purple ploughland a great stretch of country to the far Wiltshire downs. There, five years before, William Wycherly had built a little shelter facing the view, covered now with briony and clematis and bramble, a tangled mass of graceful greenery. On the hottest summer day, and the day was very hot, though it was late September, a cool breeze came over the downs. Behind lay the mysterious shadow of the wood. There was no sound but the occasional chatter of a cheeky squirrel in a fir tree near. Herrick's great brindled deerhound, Gawaine, lay at her feet, motionless, save for an occasional twitch of his ears or a swish of his tail.

The girl gave a deep sigh, and rose; the big dog, too, got up and looked at her inquiringly.

"We must go home, dear dog, and give dad his tea," she said in answer. "Gawaine, my friend, it is an unkind world to some people; I wish I had met that poor man; I wouldn't have been afraid to be friendly, and it might have made all the difference." Her eyes filled with tears again as she thought of the lonely soul hungering for a word of human comradeship.

The girl and the dog strolled slowly through the woodland way till they came to a little clearing where there was a seat. Gawaine stood still in the path, and his ears pricked forward, for a man was sitting on the seat—a young man, clad in an immaculate grey flannel suit, with a very clean straw hat lying on the ground beside him. His face was hidden in his hands, for he sat forward, elbows on knees, his whole attitude suggesting the utmost melancholy and dejection. His hair was very fair, much the same colour as Herrick's own, and in spite of its extreme shortness and smoothness there was a crinkle that hinted at possible curls.

"Hush!" she whispered to Gawaine, who looked suspicious and gave a low growl. "I dare say he doesn't know he is trespassing, and he looks so very sad; don't let's disturb him."

She laid her hand on the big dog's collar, and together they passed the stranger, who never moved or looked up. When they had gone some hundred yards down the path, Herrick stopped and looked back.

"Oh, Gawaine!" she whispered, "do you think *he* will go and shoot himself, or something, for lack of a kind word? Now, if it was a girl who sat like that, looking so miserable, I shouldn't hesitate a moment. Why should I not speak to him just because he has the misfortune to be a young man? Gawaine, whether

it's proper or whether it's not, I'll have no suicides on my conscience. Come, we'll go and ask what's wrong."

The girl and the big dog turned and walked swiftly back towards the bowed figure on the rustic seat. The fair-haired young man had not moved; he still sat in the same attitude, a very monument of woe.

As Herrick neared him the difficulty of her enterprise seemed for a moment insuperable. If he would only look up and see her, it would not be so impossible; but he showed not the slightest intention of looking up. His face was still buried in his hands; he appeared absolutely absorbed in his most melancholy reflections. She stood still about three yards away from him and in a trembling voice ejaculated, "Please——"

The young man started violently, his hands went down, and his head came up (a very handsome head it was), and he sprang to his feet exclaiming confusedly, "I beg your pardon, I expect I have no business here; I know it's private property, but it looked so cool and—there was a gap in the hedge——"

He stared at Herrick, and as he stared the expression of his face changed from one of extreme depression to one of astonished gratification.

What the young man saw was a very tall girl in a white frock and a wide-brimmed Leghorn hat wreathed with briony and honeysuckle. The sunshine through the trees made dappled, grey-green shadows on the frock, the wide-brimmed hat threw a soft shadow over a pair of the kindest, prettiest eyes it had ever been this youth's good fortune to gaze into. Just a little in front of the tall girl, as if to guard her from all possible harm, stood a great deerhound, his soft, golden-brown eyes travelling in deliberate scrutiny

from the face of his mistress to that of the stranger and then back again, as though he could not quite decide what course it was incumbent upon him to take. He moved a little more in front of his mistress and waited. As the stranger paused on his last word Herrick said quickly:

"You look so sad, I couldn't help coming back to see if there was anything I could say or do to help you. Sometimes—if one tells somebody else things don't seem quite so bad—and—I thought perhaps it would be easier to tell a perfect stranger . . . I hope there is nothing very serious the matter."

As she spoke the colour flushed and paled in her face, leaving it white and tremulous under the shadow of her hat.

The pleasure faded out of the young man's blue eyes, and in its place was a look of great tenderness and kindness as he said:

"I don't know how to thank you—it was a beautiful thought—it would indeed help me to tell you, for I'm in the very devil of a mess—oh, I beg your pardon!"

"Don't apologise," Herrick answered cheerfully. "I've heard of him before."

Gawaine almost smiled upon the stranger and wagged his tail.

"Won't you sit down, gracious lady confessor?" the stranger asked.

"We'd better both sit down," said Herrick; "it's much too hot to stand. Now, what is it?"

They sat down, Herrick at one end of the seat, the boy at the other. Gawaine stretched his great length exactly in the middle, facing them both, gravely watching them with his wine-brown eyes, each in turn.

Now that she had seen the stranger's face all question as to the propriety of her conduct had vanished

from Herrick's mind. He was only a boy, and therefore it didn't matter: even the greatest stickler for the proprieties would acknowledge the necessity for interposing between so youthful a suspect and the thought of suicide.

The boy gazed at Herrick, and Gawaine gazed at the boy. The distant squirrel was the only one who said anything. Herrick looked at the watch on her wrist.

"I'm afraid," she said gently, "that I can't stay very long, for my father will be waiting for his tea—perhaps you'd rather not tell me, after all."

"Oh, please!" the boy exclaimed eagerly, moving a little nearer Herrick. Gawaine lifted his head and looked severely at the stranger. "Have you ever in your enchanted life—I'm sure you live in some enchanted castle, where nothing ugly or evil ever comes —have you ever heard of a game, an abominable, wicked game, called bridge?"

"Of course I have, and played it," said Herrick, a little testily; "if you are going to talk nonsense I shall go away at once."

"Wait!" exclaimed the boy again. "You've made it easier. Last night I lost forty pounds at that accursed game, and I haven't got the money, and I don't in the least see how to get it, unless I go to the Jews, and I don't want to do that again. I did it once, and it cost somebody else no end to get me out of it, and my leave's not really begun yet, and what am I to live on if I plank down all that money to start with? I'm a poor brute of a sailor, you know, and it seems to me there's only one place on earth where I don't get into some sort of mischief, and that's my ship. I'm a most unlucky beggar."

Herrick did not look at this unfortunate representative of His Majesty's Navy, or she might have

seen that all sorrow had departed out of his face, and he was watching *her* with an expression of almost indecently gleeful pleasure.

"Hadn't you better tell your people?" she asked. "Of course, they'll be very angry with you—but I don't see quite what else is to be done."

"Kindest lady-confessor, I've not got any people to tell. I'm a poor, lone orphan; I really am. Aren't you sorry for me?"

His voice was most musical, most melancholy, but his blue eyes were dancing with fun, and at that moment Herrick turned to look at him. Instantly his face changed, and she thought she must have been mistaken, for he appeared, as he would have put it, "dispirited as a deaconess's home."

"My advice to you," said Herrick very soberly, "is to tell those people to whom you owe the money that you can't pay it all yet, but that you will pay it by and by—as, of course, you must. Then I should say don't play any more bridge for big stakes. Has no one ever told you it's rather silly to play for stakes you know you can't pay?"

"Sometimes one wins," murmured the dispirited one.

"Yes, and that's horrider still," said Herrick, "for then you've made some one else miserable, and taken *their* money."

"I think I could bear up against that," he murmured softly.

"Then you don't deserve any pity," Herrick said decidedly, "and I'm not going to waste any more on you," and with that she rose from the rustic seat. "You have my leave to depart," she said. "I fear you are a fraud, and aren't miserable a bit, really."

The boy leapt to his feet. "I *was* miserable, most frightfully, but you came and looked so kind and beau-

tiful"—the musical voice was most seductive—"and how can one go on being miserable in the society of angels? I shall be just as bad as ever when you've gone, and you can picture me positively galloping to the Jews—*and* the dogs—if you decline to believe in me."

"Is there *no one* you can ask to help you?"

"Yes, there is some one, but I can't get at him at present, for he's in the Indian Ocean on his way home. And I really am ashamed to ask him any more, he's got me out of such a lot of holes."

"Is there nothing you could sell?" asked Herrick, who was really anxious to offer practical advice.

"Not for forty pounds."

"Well, then, they must wait, and you mustn't play any more, and you'll get it somehow."

"But it's so beastly," groaned the debtor, "to stop in a person's house and not pay your card debts, and it's positively putrid to go away without paying them. I wish I'd never seen their rotten house party. I wish I'd waited for my brother. I wish——"

"I think," said Herrick in a very cold and distant voice, "that you must be staying with the Lowenbaums."

"I am; do you know them? Shall you be coming over for their big Tamash on the thirtieth?"

"No," she said, still coldly, "I shall not. Good-bye!"

"Wait!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Won't you tell me your name and let me tell you mine? We're sure to meet somewhere."

"It is quite unlikely we shall meet anywhere," said Herrick, with the ghost of a smile. He really was such an exceedingly good-looking boy.

The little clearing in which they were standing was

right over the highroad, some ten feet above it, and at that moment there came in sight a large, old-fashioned barouche with yellow wheels, coachman and footman on the box, and two footmen standing behind in canary-coloured liveries. In the carriage was an old gentleman, who, as he passed, made Herrick a sweeping bow.

Herrick blushed and waved her hand. "I must fly," she cried; "he's coming to tea with us."

Fly she did, and the fair-haired boy stood and watched her out of sight disconsolately. As he picked up his hat, preparatory to placing it upon his head, he noticed that the girl had left her book. He pounced upon it joyfully, but, alas! it was from Mudie's, and bore no name save that of the library. Nevertheless the youth carried it away with him. "I shall ask the first person I meet who these grounds belong to," he thought, more virtuously than grammatically, "and then I will call and return it to her. It might get wet if I leave it here." Whereupon he scrambled back through the gap in the hedge and dropped lightly down on to the highroad beneath.

As she ran accompanied by Gawaine, who tempered his easy, bounding stride to her less speedy mode of progression, she gasped out, "Oh dear, oh dear! it's Lord Delafosse! He'll get there first and he'll tell dad before I do, and then they'll both lecture me for an hour on end. He's a darling, a perfect darling, but I do believe he'd like to shut me up in a tower and let no one else speak to me because he's too old to marry me himself, that I do!"

CHAPTER VIII

STREPHON

"Heigh-ho! Strephon is a rogue."

Iolanthe.

THE large carriage with the footmen in canary-coloured liveries turned into the Manor drive. It drew up with much champing of bits and stamping of hoofs at the front entrance. The yellow footmen at the back jumped down from their perch, let down the steps, opened the carriage door, ranged themselves on either side of it, and with their assistance the old gentleman slowly and with some difficulty descended.

Herrick's father was sitting on the far side of the lawn under the shade of some great elms, wondering why that young lady did not come to make his tea, and watching with considerable impatience a brass spirit kettle that had been boiling in the liveliest fashion for some ten minutes. At the sound of wheels he hastened across to meet his guest, arriving at the moment the carriage reached his door.

"Can they put up at the stables for an hour, or shall I send them home?" asked the old gentleman, waving his neatly gloved hand towards the carriage. "I've come for a chat, if you're at leisure."

William expressed his delight at the prospect, and the carriage rolled away in the direction of the stables.

Leaning upon his host's arm the visitor crossed the lawn. With many a groan and smothered objurgation

he lowered himself into a cushioned basket chair, anathematising the while his gout, which he declared was the only thing that made him really conscious he was getting on in life. He removed his grey felt hat and took off his pearl-grey gloves, blowing into each one before he laid them neatly in the hat and placed both on the grass beside him. His appearance was rather remarkable: thin, small, stooping, with the corpse-like pallor and sunken eyes of extreme antiquity, his eyebrows, dark and bushy, meeting over his haughty hooky nose; the eyes under the heavy brows were very bright, dark, and keen, betraying no sign of senility in their flashing scrutiny, and his hands were slender, white, and delicate; in fact, his eyes and his hands were the only things about him that did not suggest incalculable age. His hair was white and abundant, parted at the back and brushed outwards towards his ears, where it curled ambrosially. It was said that this beautiful white hair was an artistic achievement, and that his lordship possessed several wigs, appearing with hair of varying length at suitable intervals. If this were so it was a triumph of the barber's art as practised in high places, and would have filled the soul of Bennett with ecstasy; so natural was the old nobleman's *coiffure* that not the most penetrating inspection could make absolutely certain as to whether he wore a wig or not.

The charitable said his hair was his own.

For the rest, he had the straight-featured, regular type of face generally associated with the early eighteenth century. He was clean shaven and elaborately dressed in a fashion that rendered no sort of homage to present modes.

"Wycherly, my dear fellow," he began, when he had settled himself with some sort of comfort in his chair,

"I have come to find fault with you; I have come to be interfering and impertinent; and unless you leave me seated here, or send for my servants to carry me away, I fear you will be obliged to listen to what I have to say. Wycherly! you don't altogether deserve to have such a daughter as you have got. I protest you don't. You don't take enough care of her. If she was *my* daughter she should never stir abroad unless two strong footmen armed with cudgels walked behind her. She certainly should never, never stray about by herself."

"But I don't think we let Herrick run about the roads alone," William said good-humouredly, "and surely in her own grounds she is safe enough. Besides, even there, Gawaine is always with her. I don't think there are many tramps in these parts, and it would certainly take a temerarious tramp to tackle fine Gawaine."

"I was not thinking of tramps," the old lord said disdainfully, balancing the tips of the fingers of one hand against those of the other. "You, my dear Wycherly, are too inclined to omit from your calculations all possible contingencies save the most obvious. When Chloë wanders unprotected in the woods, Strephon is never far to seek." Then with a sudden change of tone, "By the way, I thought you told me that Mrs. Wycherly was firm in her determination not to know the rabble that on occasion occupies the odious architectural monstrosity that has spoilt the view for both of us?"

"She has not called yet, sir; but you know—no one better—how difficult and how undesirable it is to be actively unfriendly in a small neighbourhood."

"So far, she has not called; that's as I thought. Nevertheless"—and the old lord paused portentously, shaking an accusing finger at William—"this very

afternoon did I see Herrick, our nymph of Bredon, your daughter, and the young lady who enjoys my highest consideration . . . I saw her, I tell you, engaged in apparently animated and intimate conversation with a youth—I grudgingly admit he was a personable-looking stripling, but that makes it all the more disastrous—that I happen to know is actually staying in Sodom."

William did not appear quite as overcome by these revelations as Lord Delafosse would have considered fitting, but he had the grace to exclaim, "I fear that there will be nothing for it but the two stout fellows with bludgeons. But here she is, to answer for herself."

Flushed and breathless with her long run, Herrick walked slowly across the grass to recover herself. She knew that she was in for a lecture, but for once her conscience was really clear, and she kissed her hand to Lord Delafosse, remarking gaily, "How nice it is to see you, and I know *you're* dying to know who was talking to me, and so am I, for I haven't the ghost of an idea."

"Come here, you baggage," called the old lord; "I can't get up when once I'm down. I'm not sure that you deserve that I should kiss you—but . . ." Herrick knelt by his chair, and he kissed her on the forehead very gently and kindly—"we'll kiss you first and scold you afterwards; what do you mean by calmly announcing that you were talking to a young man whose name, even, you don't know?"

"My father looks glum and sour," Herrick exclaimed, scrambling to her feet. "He wants his tea, and so do you, and so—most of all—do I. When we've had it, you'll both be better tempered and more reasonable, and instead of finding fault with me you will

be overcome with admiration for the nobility of my conduct; but I do hope you, Lord Delafosse, can tell me who he is, for I shall never know another happy moment until I have found out."

"There, you see," the old lord said, with a significant flash of his dark eyes towards William, "tramps are not the only dangers lurking in Bredon Woods. There is one thing," continued Lord Delafosse, "that I whole-heartedly admire in Herrick, and that is her appetite."

"I *am* hungry," Herrick remarked, as she helped herself to yet another buttered scone. "Moreover, the longer I take over my tea, the further off does it put those tedious explanations which I can see you are both anxiously awaiting."

"What I want to know," said the old lord, frowning fiercely, "is upon what trumped-up excuse that fellow dared to speak to you?"

"He didn't," said Herrick, pausing, her scone poised in mid-air, to meet the angry glance of Lord Delafosse with disarming sweetness: "I spoke to him."

William Wycherly looked with bewildered amusement from his serenely smiling daughter to his guest, whose expression was changing from one of wrath to one of horrified amazement, but he said nothing, for this solution had already occurred to him as possible.

"He was sitting on a seat and looked so miserable, and we passed by and he never looked up, and so I thought I'd better ask him what was the matter, and we went back. He told me, and I think I gave him good advice."

"What *was* the matter?" asked her father.

"I don't think it would be very nice of me to tell that, do you? It was confidence, you see, and he really was very worried, poor boy!"

Dead silence followed these revelations. Lord Delafosse, his elbows on the arms of his chair, bridged and unbridged his delicate finger-tips with noiseless regularity.

Herrick composedly finished her scone, laid down her cup, and began to hum a little song which she had learnt especially to please Lord Delafosse. It was the song described by its author, Mr. Samuel Pepys, as of excellent worth, and Herrick sang the last verse, growing quite audible and distinct as she reached the last two lines:

> "I break the hearts of half the world,
> And she breaks mine."

"Egad! So she does, so she does, the minx!" cried Lord Delafosse, his frown smoothed out, his eyes twinkling. "She's always in the wrong; she always makes the worse appear the better reason. She . . . The devil! There's the fellow himself."

The old lord stared across the lawn as he gave vent to this profane ejaculation, and Herrick and her father followed his gaze.

Ellen, the trim parlourmaid, was approaching them across the grass, closely followed by a visitor bearing in his hand a grey-green book.

"Mr. Edmund Bethune," she announced.

William arose and went to greet him, meeting the visitor's ingratiating smile with a face in which severity rather than welcome was the predominant expression.

"I think you know my brother, Mr. Wycherly," said Mr. Edmund Bethune with easy friendliness; "he was to have brought me himself a little later on, to present me, but as I happened to be in the neighbourhood, I thought perhaps you would forgive my impatience of any such delay."

"Your brother?" William Wycherly repeated in a puzzled tone, rapidly running over his acquaintances in his mind.

"You are kind enough to take care of some books of ours, I think? And he stayed a night with you before he went to India—some years ago."

"Ah, *now* I know who you are! You see, your brother bears our name, and that's what puzzled me."

William shook hands quite warmly with his guest, and turned to the rest of his party.

"Mr. Bethune, my daughter; Lord Delafosse."

"Mr. Bethune and I have already met," said Herrick. "I think he has come to bring me back a book I left in the wood this afternoon. Have you had tea? I fear this is very cold. Dad, dear, will you order some more?" Herrick was flushed, and looked beseechingly at Lord Delafosse, while Mr. Bethune protested most untruthfully that he had already had tea.

The old lord sat taciturn, disapproving, unapproachable; but as his carriage rolled up to the front door he broke his obdurate silence to remark grimly: "Herrick will give me an arm across the lawn. It is clearly her vocation in life to minister to the afflicted."

Herrick flew to his side.

"No, I don't want you, Wycherly. Don't let me take you away from your guest; I wish you a good afternoon, sir," and his lordship, with some difficulty and a suppressed groan, got upon his feet and took the rounded, muslin-clad arm crooked for his assistance.

"Now, Chloë, tell me the truth," he whispered, as they moved away slowly together; "did you know Strephon was coming? or was the restoration of the book entirely his own ingenious idea?"

Herrick stood still. Red and indignant she looked round at the quizzical old face that only reached her ear. "If I didn't love you very much," she said, "and if I didn't know that you love me, I should leave you here—here in the middle of the lawn—and send your servants to fetch you. Why *should* I pretend? If I'd known who he was I'd have brought him back to tea."

"My child," said the old lord, patting the firm arm under his hand, "it's no use being cross with your poor old friend—you were in the wrong. If you will do these unconventional, I had almost said unmaidenly, things, you must expect some misconception."

"Seigneur, you will never be able to make me what you would approve of, so I'm afraid you must try to approve of me as I am; it's much pleasanter to approve of people. You say yourself that it's very fatiguing to be cross, and, after all, what harm is done? Of course, we must have got to know that nice boy; he's a kind of cousin, so what on earth does it matter that I spoke to him an hour before the introduction took place?"

"Men do not usually confide unnameable calamities to a strange young lady immediately upon introduction."

"It wasn't an unnameable calamity," Herrick answered hotly; "it was a very common . . . No! you shan't make me tell, you designing man, but it was nothing *you* would consider disgraceful, by all accounts."

"Hoity-toity! she's turning the tables. I must save myself; but I should like to send you to bed and lock you in your room . . ."

"I should get out of the window," chirped Herrick. "I've done it before now—not that any one ever locked me in my room."

"You are incorrigible. Where is my kind hostess? All these shocking irregularities have for the moment elbowed her gracious presence from my thoughts."

"Mother has gone to a meeting—a committee meeting with much talk and weak tea—about the Marlehouse Home for Little Girls; she is on the committee this year."

"Lucky committee! I believe I am on the board of that institution, but I fear I have not yet attended a meeting. Well, good-bye, sweetest mischief; try to be a little good, a little circumspect."

Lord Delafosse was hoisted into his carriage by the canary-coloured minions: Herrick hopped up on the steps before the footman closed them to see that all was comfortable, then she stood back and watched her old friend drive away. As he leaned against the comfortable cushions Lord Delafosse sighed, repeating softly to himself:

> "At first I thought her by our prophet sent
> As a reward for valour's toiles,
> More worth than all my father's spoiles;
> But now she is become my punishment."

Herrick looked at the house as though she had half a mind to go in, then she looked at the little group by the table and saw that the thoughtful Ellen had brought more tea, and that her father was pouring it out for the visitor.

She looked at the house again. Her face was very grave; she sighed, turned her back upon the garden group, and walked a few steps towards the open door.

Mr. Edmund Bethune's laugh rang out in the still summer air, boyish, musical, infectious. Gawaine, who had accompanied her in her speeding of the part-

ing guest, looked up in her face with questioning eyes, as who should say, "Well, which is it to be?"

Herrick smiled and turned towards the garden again. The last rhythmic beat of horses' hoofs died away in the distance.

She shook her head and stood still. "I wonder if it would be more dignified to go in?" she said to herself, "or would it be rude and silly?"

Gawaine put his nose into her hand and wagged his tail. She heard her father laugh.

"Of course it would be silly," she said to herself, and almost ran across the lawn to the group by the tea-table.

"My brother has sailed, Miss Wycherly," Edmund said as Herrick seated herself on the arm of her father's chair. "I go back to my ship until he arrives and then I get my long leave. We're going to do a theatre or two in town and then we both hope to come down here, live at 'The Bull' till we can find some rooms, and get some hunting."

"Cousin Montagu coming home!" Herrick exclaimed joyfully. "How jolly! I shall be hunting too, Mr. Bethune; shan't I, dad?"

"Please remember," said Edmund, "that if Montagu is Cousin Montagu, *I* am Cousin Edmund."

Herrick did not answer, and Edmund went on: "It would be very unkind and unfair to sow the seeds of jealousy and dispeace between two loving brothers."

Still Herrick did not answer, and William Wycherly, rather surprised at her silence, said hospitably:

"Well, your brother is under a long-ago promise to come and stay with us on his return, so perhaps you will be able to come too. We must arrange it when he arrives. Ah, there is mother at last, Herrick!"

Herrick flew up to meet her mother.

"You must have come by the back, dear," she exclaimed volubly. "I never heard you. Have you had a long, dull meeting? What ages you've been. Yes," in answer to Margaret's look of inquiry, "that's little Edmund Bethune, the naughty one, and I don't believe he has mended his ways in the least; he is staying with the Lowenbaums till Monday, then he is coming back later on to be with Cousin Montagu. Did you meet Lord Delafosse? He was here."

Across the velvet lawn, where the elms threw long shadows and the light was golden in the setting sun, they came, these two tall women, bright-haired and graceful. Herrick held her mother by the arm and overtopped her by an inch: her eyes were like Margaret's in their kind friendliness and steady constancy, but they were young as the morning in their eager outlook on the world. The likeness between Herrick and her mother was at first sight remarkably strong, but those who knew them best declared that the resemblance was superficial, that in Herrick's face a thousand mischievous surprises lurked in unexpected dimples to baffle the unwary. Her features were as playfellows, and the games they played were so multifarious, that the girl never looked the same for five minutes at a time. Where she most resembled Margaret was in the clear delicacy of her tint. In her case naturally the colouring was more subtle, as it was more decided; in fact, Lord Delafosse, who loved her, was wont to declare that she was "like the peaches on his own south wall, warranted by their bloom." But her roses flushed and paled with every passing emotion, and her worst enemy could never have said she was "high-coloured."

"You have not altered as much as your brother,"

Margaret said, with her cordial smile, "though I should hardly describe you as 'the little one,' as Herrick did just now."

"She also—I couldn't help hearing, really I couldn't —said 'the naughty one,' and I fear, Mrs. Wycherly, I've changed even less in that respect," and Edmund shook his smooth head and sighed mournfully as he gazed into Margaret's mild eyes with the greatest earnestness. "I seem born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards."

To himself he was saying: "She's sure to tell her people about the bridge, and ten to one they'll disapprove awfully."

"Your appearance does not exactly suggest sackcloth and ashes," Margaret said, smiling amusedly at the good-looking boy.

"Ah!" groaned Edmund, wagging his head again; "I'm like that chap in Byron, 'all green and wildly fresh without . . . and all thingumbobs within.' "

A distant clock struck seven. Edmund leapt to his feet. "I say, I'm awfully sorry; I've paid an unconscionable call—it's getting quite dark."

Not a chance did he get of a word alone with Herrick. She avoided his eyes and seemed to convey subtle disapproval of him with every frou-frou of the white silk petticoat under the muslin skirt. If only he knew whether she had told about the bridge! If only she would look at him again as she had looked at him in the wood before she knew who he was! But Herrick shook hands with him and bade him farewell with chillest courtesy, and his host walked with him as far as the drive gate.

On the Monday morning following Edmund's visit Janet came as usual to call Herrick and bring her the early cup of tea. When that drowsy young lady

roused herself, she found a letter lying on the tray beside her bed. Now, the Manor letters were brought in their own special bag, and Mrs. Wycherly kept its key; moreover, the said bag never arrived until breakfast-time, so that Herrick knew this letter must have come by hand, even before she examined it and found no post-mark. She turned it over before opening it, wondering sleepily who on earth would send a note so very early. The envelope was of thick paper with rough edges, big and square. The large crest on the flap was partially concealed by a blob of sealing-wax, evidently hastily applied. The letter was clearly addressed to "Miss Herrick Wycherly" in a bold and legible handwriting. Herrick raised herself on her elbow, shook her thick, curly hair back from her face, and tore the letter open. Of course she looked at the signature first; she laughed, turned back to the beginning, and read:

"DEAR LADY CONFESSOR,—On Saturday night I won it all back. I thought I'd have just one more flutter. Last night, so that I shouldn't be rooked again, I persuaded a non-bridge-playing man to come for a stroll in the moonlight, and we prolonged our stroll till after midnight, when I went to bed. I got out of playing in the afternoon too. This morning I go off by the 9.25, and I shan't play any more for high stakes, unless you are unkind when next we meet. I shan't need to sponge on old Montagu now. Aren't you glad? I am, most awfully, and I am your grateful and unworthy

"COUSIN EDMUND."

Herrick read it through twice. She laughed again; a moment later she looked grave. Never in her life

before had she received even a note without her parents' knowledge. Notes there had been in plenty from admiring partners after her first balls the year before, but she carried them all to her father, who laughed, and bid her answer them or not as the case seemed to require. But this was different, for it referred to something she felt sure that the writer would prefer her parents not to know. Not one word had Edmund said to that effect. Indeed, he had not had any opportunity for saying anything of the kind, but he had looked at her most beseechingly, and she knew quite well what his looks meant.

In Herrick's simple code of honour it counted as a shabby action to repeat anything to another's detriment if the narrator knew that the other would very much prefer silence upon that particular subject. So after considerable reflection, which made her very late for breakfast, she tossed Edmund's note into one of the drawers of her dressing-table. "If they ask me about it I'll tell them that it was from Cousin Edmund," she said to herself, as she ran downstairs. "He's much more like Strephon, as Lord Delafosse called him, than Edmund, it's such a preachey sounding name; and if those dears ask to see it, I'll just say it was about his own affairs, and private, and they won't ask any more, but I shall feel a perfect beast."

Janet did not mention the letter to her mistress, and nobody asked anything about it.

Edmund, back at Portsmouth, watched for the post most anxiously for about four days. Then he came to the conclusion that "Cousin Herrick" was not going to answer his letter. "First girl I ever knew that didn't," he added. "Confoundedly pretty girl, too. Wonder how much she told her people!"

CHAPTER IX

COWPER'S COTTAGE

"Take ship, for happiness is somewhere to be had."
GEORGE MEREDITH.

"MOTHER darling, such a pretty lady has taken the cottage; I saw her to-day as dad and I rode past. She was standing at the door with Mrs. Milne. Oh, a beautiful lady, young and graceful, and—I know you hate the word, but she really was—smart, in the loveliest tailor-made frock, and when we came back Mrs. Milne tapped at the window for us to stop, and she came out and told us that the cottage is really let at last—she's had so many disappointments, poor thing! and she and Dorothy can go abroad for the winter, for this lady has taken it for a year. She likes it because you see it's only just over three miles from Marlehouse, and she doesn't hunt, but she'll drive to the meets, and she has only one little boy, so she'll be lonely, and you *will* call, won't you, mother dear? because you see she's quite a near neighbour, and I'll make Lord Dalafosse call, and lots of other people, and we'll be good to her, poor pretty thing: her husband is in India. . . ."

Herrick paused breathlessly.

"Did you happen, among all your other discoveries, to find out the lady's name?" asked her mother.

"Yes, I did, it's Reeve—something Reeve. Mrs. Milne says she seemed very reserved, so you'll like that,

won't you, mother?—you always say I am so unreserved. Oh, I hope she'll like me, for I shall want to look at her all day long, she's so lovely—I wonder if the little boy is lovely too. She's coming next week, and the Milnes go on Thursday. I'm sorry they're going, but it will be nice for them and this lady. Oh, mother, you'll *love* her! Her hair is just like the bronzes in the hall at Delafosse, dark in the shadows and golden on the waves, beautiful *even* waves. Mine will never go that way, and dad made me promise never to use tongs and it isn't a bit smart really."

"Herrick, Herrick!" Margaret cried warningly, "I *will* not have you hungering to be 'smart.' When grannie was a girl, people only used that word of maidservants in their Sunday clothes—you know how she hates it. We are going to grannie next week, so do try not to vex her."

"Mother dear, I will be careful with grannie. Old Lord Delafosse is just as bad. I believe he would like it better if I called that beauteous being an 'elegant female'; we met him too, and he is raging and ramping because Mrs. Lowenbaum wrote and asked 'if she could rent a pew'—'a pew' (he loathes the word as badly as 'smart') in his chapel, so he wrote back in the third person presenting his compliments and informed Mrs. Lowenbaum that all seats in Bredon Chapel were free except those belonging to Bredon Manor and Bredon Delafosse, so she wrote again and said wouldn't he make an exception and allow Surrum Grange to 'possess a pew.' Well, he made the secretary write this time, again presented his compliments, and informed Mrs. Lowenbaum that the chapel was intended for the use of persons living in the parish of Bredon, which had no other church, but that he had no doubt the verger (fancy Bredon Chapel with a

verger!) would try to find seats for occasional visitors."

"What happened then?"

"The whole house party motored over to afternoon service (oh, why was I too lazy to go? I lay in the hammock reading, all afternoon), and Lord Delafosse said—this is word for word what he said: 'In they came, rustling and whispering and stinking of cherry-blossom and *chipre,* for all the world like a set of *coryphées* at old Drury Lane, and they disturbed my devotions most confoundedly. When service was over I went and sat in the vestry till I was sure by the snorts and explosions and foul odours that those accursèd motor cars had got under way. When they had all gone, though you can't call such an exit anything but satanic, I ventured forth, and my man told me that they waited for a good five minutes in the hope of introducing themselves, confound their impudence! It seems to me that unless I charter a balloon to take me to church I cannot escape these abominable people. I'll *have* to know them, and not a pretty woman amongst 'em, by Gad!' "

Herrick imitated the old gentleman with truth and spirit, and Margaret, although she shook her head at her frivolous daughter, shook also with inward laughter, for she could picture the whole scene.

"But there's a church at Surrum," she said mildly; "why do they want to come to Bredon?"

"Mother darling, the lord is at Bredon," Herrick said, with such a perfectly innocent face that her mother acquitted her of intentional profanity.

"Child, you are most uncharitable. I dare say they wanted to see the dear little church—it's quite unique, you know—and why shouldn't they?"

Herrick kissed her mother, swung her habit over

her arm, and proceeded to dance round that gentle lady with much display of trim top-boots, crying tauntingly as she pirouetted: "You'll have to call, you'll have to call; you're taking their part now and you'll have to call!" and before her mother could chide her she whirled out of the room and clattered up the oaken stairs, exclaiming joyously as she went: "If only *we'd* gone to church yesterday afternoon there'd have been at least two pretty women, egad!"

Cowper's Cottage was an ideally charming little house with an old-fashioned garden and two-stall stable and coach-house; and Mrs. Milne had furnished it with beautiful old things brought from an historic house in the North. She and her one child, Dorothy, a girl about Herrick's age, lived there happily enough till Dorothy, during a cold spring, fell a victim to influenza, which was followed by inflammation of the lungs. These combined maladies left the girl so delicate that the Marlehouse doctor, with his customary vigour, advocated a winter abroad, and Mrs. Milne decided to let her house furnished. It was not so much for the sake of the money as to be assured that it was kept in order and well-aired during her absence. Consequently she was very particular as to her tenant. People with schoolboy sons she rigidly tabooed. People with a large nursery party were anathema. Young married people coming for the hunting might "smoke all over the place," and bachelors "would never see that the windows were opened," so that there seemed every probability that Cowper's Cottage—so called because there was a legend to the effect that the poet Cowper had once dwelt there—would remain unlet. Then, apparently from the clouds, there dropped a lady who fulfilled every requirement; she had only one child, and a husband who would not be home before the late

spring. A husband, moreover, whom she declared to be of most retiring and quiet habits. The lady gave her bankers as reference, also the India Office. Mrs. Milne applied to Lord Delafosse, who possessed lists of every conceivable service and province in India. The lady's husband was run to earth, and in the column devoted to such items a considerable number of rupees *per mensem* were found to go with his post. So in consideration of Mrs. Reeve taking the house for a year Mrs. Milne reduced her rent to five guineas a week, including linen and silver, and every one thought the incoming tenant had got a very good bargain. Moreover, she expressed her readiness to take on Mrs. Milne's two excellent maids, her coachman, and her gardener. But the maids were obdurate and declared that they could never "abear" to see a strange lady in their mistress's rooms. The men-servants, less affected by sentimental reasoning, expressed their willingness to remain on at their present wages.

A week later Cynthia Reeve, Roger, and three maids had taken up their abode at Cowper's Cottage. Had Cynthia been asked what led her to select the Cottage as her dwelling during her stay at home, she would have been hard put to it to give a satisfactory reason.

It was that Montagu had mentioned to her that he expected to spend part of his leave there, and, on arrival in England, she had purchased a directory of the county and found that there were a great many nice places scattered about the neighbourhood. During the voyage home she further discovered, from certain youthful officers who were her devoted slaves, that Marlehouse was a good hunting-centre, much frequented by "smart" people during the winter months, and she decided, after a month in town, and two at a fashionable watering-place, that she would go down to

Marlehouse and look at such furnished houses as were to let.

She stayed at "The Bull" accompanied by a "useful maid" whom she had engaged shortly after her arrival in London.

Roger had inconsiderately "caught a measle"—as he put it—at the seaside, and Cynthia, greatly to her annoyance, had to find rooms in a great hurry for him and for the useful maid who attended upon them both, in a distant village, for the hotel manager made it very plain that on no account might any one indulge in any measles under his roof.

So Roger was carried off in a cab and was very ill indeed. The doctor who attended him, a kindly general practitioner with children of his own, suggested a trained nurse, and Cynthia made no objection. The nurse was very good to Roger, and being a fairly clear-sighted woman, grieved greatly when she had to leave him. She warned both his mother and the useful maid (whom in her own mind she set down as a "selfish hussy") that he would need great care for some time to come. The child's convalescence was very tedious and he was extremely fretful and miserable; he caught cold continually and was generally as troublesome as he could be.

Now Cynthia just tolerated her plain little son in his usual placid and submissive habit, but a feebly protesting, cross little boy she found very trying indeed. Especially as on their return to town Roger developed a curious stupidity and inattention that his mother considered both naughty and rude.

The useful maid, Jemima Grimes by name, frankly declared that she " 'ated childring, especially them as was always w'inin' and cryin' for nothing at all, and

was sulky and took no notice of what them as 'ad charge of 'em said for their good."

By every mail Cynthia received anxious inquiries from her husband as to the kind of governess she had engaged for Roger. But Cynthia was singularly difficult to please in the matter of governesses. There was always something against every applicant who presented herself. Roger's father had instructed his wife to offer a liberal salary and to try by every means in her power to secure a lady, kind, refined, who understood and loved little children. He even went so far as to draw up an advertisement to be inserted in the *Times* and the *Morning Post* to this end.

Those advertisements were never sent to the papers mentioned. Cynthia disliked writing letters; she disliked interviewing what she called "dowdy, grasping women." She decided not to be in a hurry. She was sure to come across the right sort of person when settled in a house of her own, and it was so much better to have personal recommendations. She wrote by every mail to her husband (Cynthia prided herself on always doing her duty), expatiated on the difficulty of finding a reliable woman till she was settled, and declared that she infinitely preferred to look after Roger herself until an ideally satisfactory guardian for him could be found.

This pleased the Commissioner. He thought that Cynthia was beginning to realise her responsibilities, and although he regretted that Roger was not yet provided with a suitable governess, he hoped that the child's entire dependence upon her might awaken Cynthia's apparently dormant maternal instincts. He was duly informed of the measles, and the attendance of the trained nurse somewhat assuaged his anxiety. He was quite pleased with the idea of Cowper's Cottage,

and became almost pathetically eager to secure Montagu's society, because he knew that a large portion of his leave would be spent in the Bredon neighbourhood.

"You'll write to me about the boy, won't you?" he said to Montagu one night as they sat smoking after their *tête-à-tête* dinner. "Of course, I hear every week from my wife, but you know what women are—not good letter-writers as a rule, never by any chance tell you what you most want to know. I miss the little chap most horribly."

Roger Reeve's voice was husky, and Montagu was careful not to look at his host as he said simply, "So do I."

"Well, you'll be seeing him soon, and I'll take it as uncommonly kind if you'll write and tell me exactly how you think he is looking. He's been ill, you know, and I'm a bit afraid of an English winter for him. If you come across his governess just impress upon her that Anglo-Indian children need a lot of wrapping up, won't you?"

"I'll ask Mrs. Wycherly to give an eye to him as well," Montagu said. "She is one of the kindest and wisest of women, and from what I remember (though of course it's all very vague, for I was only there one night) I fancy Mrs. Reeve must be living quite near them."

The Commissioner of Khafadia was quite unconscious that he had betrayed the secrets of his heart to Montagu. Nor did Montagu at the moment perceive that he had accepted a confidence.

Reeve was a simple-minded man, singularly inarticulate where he felt most; but had he been the subtlest schemer in creation he could not have hit upon any surer plan for throwing up a barrier between his wife and any sentimental pursuit on the part of

Montagu than he effected by those broken, wistful sentences begging his friend to send him news of the little son he loved so well.

Meanwhile Cynthia had established herself at Cowper's Cottage, happy in the reflection that at last she had scaled a goodly portion of the social ladder. She had reached the rung labelled "County people" in her own mind, and this had seemed a dazzling eminence in her girlhood. Now she felt that it was but a stepping-stone to higher things. The dazzling brilliancy of the so-called "smart set" (nebulous, ever-shifting cluster of nobodies) quite outshone the sober radiance shed by the solid, slow-going "landed gentry" of her early adulation.

Cynthia's grandmother at Clifton was dead. Her old grandfather seldom left home, and in any case was far too proud to remind his fashionable granddaughter of past kindnesses or of a relationship she seemed so ready to forget. On her last visit to England she had stayed for a fortnight with the old people, and during that fortnight she had quarrelled with most of her uncles and aunts, who frankly declared her "side" to be quite intolerable, while she, for her part, pronounced them to be "impossible" by reason of their vulgarity and "common ways."

She had small fear of any interference from her own relations. Her husband, so unsympathetic in all her aims, was far away. The field was clear, Cynthia's mind was buoyant and cheerful, and as for Roger's governess—well, she would be sure to hear of somebody from some one living in the place.

CHAPTER X

ROGER MAKES A FRIEND

"Oh, Leerie, see a little child and nod to him to-night!"
R. L. S.

HERRICK and her mother were unable to make their first call on Mrs. Reeve until she had been established nearly a month in Cowper's Cottage. First they went north to take part in the "coming of age" ball of a young cousin, and from there William carried them off to France for a fortnight.

Directly they got back, however, Herrick gave her mother no peace until she went to make acquaintance with the lovely tenant of Cowper's Cottage.

Cynthia had in no way lacked callers. When she had been but a week in Cowper's Cottage the card-tray in her little hall was full to overflowing. The County had received her with open arms. The beautiful young woman, torn between anxiety about her little boy's health and her desire to remain in India at her husband's side (stock phrases came easily to Cynthia; when she quarrelled with people she was apt to bid them "never darken my doors again") touched and interested the neighbourhood.

It was a bright October afternoon after a morning's heavy rain when Herrick and her mother set forth on foot to call upon the fair tenant of Cowper's Cottage. That quaint little house did not boast a drive up to the front door. Such drive as there was led

to the stable yard. Therefore did callers leave their carriages at the roofed gate and walk up the narrow gravel-path, bordered with violas, stocks, and clove-scented carnations, to the pretty porch.

The road to Marlehouse that led past the cottage was edged by grass on either side, but the piece immediately in front of that picturesque abode was gravelled as a standing place for the vehicles of visitors. Such a vehicle was waiting there now as Herrick and her mother approached—the familiar, roomy, rather remarkable wagonette belonging to the Vicar of Marlehouse, who had a large and lively family. Part of the family had evidently gone into the cottage, but the fourth boy and a neighbour's son, who did lessons with him, aged ten and nine respectively, were pacing up and down on the edge of grass arm in arm in earnest conversation. A third little boy, very small and thin, with a pale face and big wistful eyes, was trotting along by their side some yard and a half away. Margaret, intent upon getting her call over—for she by no means loved these social obligations—hastened through the gate and found herself in the porch, having rung the bell before she noticed that she was not followed by her daughter. She concluded that Herrick had, even in that few minutes, met one of the many with whom she wished to exchange greetings, and went in without her.

Herrick saw the three boys and paused in the gateway to watch them; they had not seen her, for they were now walking away from her.

Why did the little boy walk so far off from the others? Why did he turn his head so wistfully towards them?

Presently the three turned; Herrick came out of the gateway to meet them and called out, "Why don't

you give the little one your hand, Ronnie? Why does he walk so far away from you?"

Ronnie and his friend came up, capped Herrick politely, and beamed at her with frank, rosy faces as Ronnie said in a low voice, "He's deaf, you know, so we don't mind him walking with us if he's a bit away, because then he can't hear what we say, and so we can talk secrets just as if he wasn't there. He isn't a bad little chap really; he doesn't worry us like some kids."

The tears welled into Herrick's eyes and the colour rushed to her cheeks. "I think you are two horrid, unkind, *mean* little boys," she cried, her voice vibrating with indignation. "If you had any good feeling at all you'd talk louder than usual so that he *should* hear what you say. I wouldn't have believed any one could be so cruel!"

The two bigger boys stood silent during this outburst, puzzled and sorry, but quite unable to comprehend this angry young lady's point of view.

Roger stood staring at her, even more puzzled than these tolerant big boys who allowed him worshipfully to accompany them in their promenade. He was rather nervous; had he been rude and inattentive again? he wondered; was she scolding *him?* Of late Roger had got rather afraid of scoldings. No one had ever scolded him in India. There he had been a little prince, the servants vying with each other to secure his favour. Here, the servants ordered him about, and found fault with him even, when, so far as he knew, he was not naughty. Was this *mem-sahib* angry too? Let him hasten to propitiate her if possible.

"How do you do?" he said, politely holding out a small and grubby hand. "I'm Roger. I hope you

have not spoke to me and I was ninattentif. I don't seem to hear things loud like I used to, but I truly don't mean to be rude."

Herrick knelt down on the wet grass beside him: she took the little hand in both her own, and kissed his upturned face. Roger decided that this tall *mem-sahib* was not cross with *him*, anyway, though why she should look just as if she was going to cry he could not make out.

"Do you think," said Herrick very distinctly, "that you would like to walk up and down with me for a bit, and we could have a talk? I've come to visit you. Your mother lives here, doesn't she?"

"No," said the little boy shaking his head, "we *live* in a much nicer place van this; we're only home on leave; we *live* with my daddie in Injia, you know. *I'm* a *sahib* there."

"Of course you are, and you're a *sahib* here, and a very nice, polite little *sahib* I think you are; shall we walk in the road? or, better still, in the garden on the path? This grass is rather wet, and you haven't got very thick shoes on." Then, turning her head towards the shamefaced Ronnie and his friend, "I'm going to talk secrets now with *my* friend. Good-bye."

"They're *big* boys, aren't they?" Roger said with genuine admiration; "I suppose you're a big girl, aren't you? You don't look quite a *mem* somehow."

Herrick laughed. "Will you have me for a friend, Roger? I can play with you just as well as those big boys, really."

"They don't *play* with me," said Roger, "but I likes to watch them, they're such big boys. I like *sahibs* best, don't you?"

"That depends," said Herrick, looking down into

the eager little face raised to hers. "I like some *sahibs* very, very much. But I like some ladies equally well, don't you?"

"No," Roger replied with great decision, "ladies are so busy."

"Busy," Herrick repeated in a puzzled voice, "I thought men were always busier than women."

Roger looked at her with serious eyes and shook his head. "It's a different busyness," he said; "it finishes."

By this time they had walked right round the garden and were coming up the central path hand in hand. It faced the drawing-room windows, and Herrick could see her mother, Mrs. Talbot, the Vicar's wife, two Miss Talbots, and Mrs. Reeve, all seated therein. A remembrance of her social duties returned to her. She knew that her mother would heap reproaches upon her for deserting her in this summary fashion after having positively dragged her out to call.

"Shall you and I go into the drawing-room and see your mother?" she asked Roger, tightening her hold upon the cold little hand she held.

"No, thank you," said Roger with grave politeness, "I don't want to go in there at all."

"My mother is in there, wouldn't you like to see her?"

"No, thank you," Roger said again, serenely decided.

"I fear I shall *have* to go in, because, you see, I came to call upon your mother, and my mother is waiting for me."

"Have you got a daddie?" asked Roger irrelevantly.

"Yes, I have; he's a dear."

"Is he in there?"

"No, he doesn't come calling much. You'll see him when you come to play with me."

"What shall we play at?" Roger inquired, skilfully guiding Herrick into a path that led away from the house. "Can you play pittence polo?"

"Oh yes," said Herrick with the easy confidence of inexperience; "we might play it with croquet mallets on the lawn."

"Then I'll come, thank you," Roger said, still pulling gently away from the house. "I like you."

"And I like you exceedingly," said Herrick, squeezing the little hand again. "I think we shall be great friends."

"I haven't been ninattentif?" he asked anxiously. "I've answered always, haven't I?"

Being reassured on this point, he stopped, and looking up in Herrick's face with his big anxious eyes, said suddenly, "Why can't I hear things loud like I used to?"

Herrick felt a great desire to take Roger up in her arms and cuddle him, but she restrained herself: and having been brought up to answer a straight question in straight fashion, she said very gently, "I think it must be because you are a little deaf, dear boy."

"What's deaf?"

"When people don't hear things very quickly they are deaf."

"What makes it?"

"Perhaps you were ill . . . perhaps you had a cold. I dare say it will get all right by and by . . ."

"I know!" Roger exclaimed; "it was that measle that did it. Did you ever catch a measle?"

"Indeed I did; isn't it horrid?"

Roger did not answer; he was evidently thinking

deeply. He was silent for a minute, looking upon the ground, then he lifted his head and said: "I don't see if you're deaf how you're ninattentif: if you can't hear it's not your fault, is it?"

"Certainly not," said Herrick hastily, "it's other people's fault for not speaking distinctly. But, sonnie, we *must* go back to the house, my mother will be waiting for me."

Visions of an impatient and injured parent assailed her. Duty pulled one way, an eager little boy literally and figuratively pulled another. "Do come with me," she begged, "and then we'll show each other our mothers. That will be nice, won't it?"

Roger did not seem sure, but he allowed himself to be half dragged, half carried in the direction of the house. When they reached the porch Margaret was standing there bidding farewell to Mrs. Reeve. "Ah, here is my daughter at last!" she exclaimed. "Herrick, where have you been?"

"I've been making friends with Mrs. Reeve's little boy," she said smilingly, certain of Mrs. Reeve's forgiveness; but that lady did not seem to find much palliation for Herrick's conduct in their explanation; she shook hands with her rather coldly, hardly looked her tardy visitor in the face, and bade her little son run upstairs and wash his dirty hands and face.

Margaret, mother-woman above all else, felt herself attracted by Roger's plain little face, dirty though it was, and forgave Herrick's defection on the spot. She also noted that he was bidden to wash his own hands and face—such a little boy, and the only one!

Herrick felt very uncomfortable, for she feared that she had incurred Mrs. Reeve's displeasure for Roger as well as for herself.

Mrs. Wycherly and her daughter made their fare-

wells with some haste, and hurried down the garden path to the old-roofed gate, one of the beauties of Cowper's Cottage.

As they turned out into the road a large red motor drove up and stopped.

Roger, oblivious of the maternal command, raced down the long garden till he reached a door in the wall that opened on to the road. Alas! it was locked, and his little hands were by no means strong enough to turn the key, but the gardener had left a short ladder against the wall, and up this Roger sped.

He looked over. Yes! the big girl and her mother were coming.

They were close upon him, Herrick talking eagerly.

He was far too timid to call out, but he did hope they would look up. He was sure the big girl would wave to him if she saw him. Perhaps she would even stop and speak. She had such a nice, comfortable hand; even through her glove he had felt its warmth.

His mother's maid and the other servants were forever impressing upon him that little boys should be seen and not heard. If these ladies saw him it would be quite correct. But if they didn't . . .

Roger's heart went down into his strap-shoes. They had passed him, and he could have touched the pheasant's feathers in the big girl's hat as she went by. Suddenly Margaret turned her head—she never knew what it was that made her look back, but she saw the sorrowful, yearning little face, not over-clean, with lips drawn down at the corners in bitterest disappointment, and in a flash she realised that he was waiting for them.

"See, Herrick, there's your little friend," and Roger nearly tumbled off the ladder in his excitement.

It was not a very high wall, and when Herrick

proposed that he should climb to the top and she would lift him down, Roger achieved this feat and stood on the pathway looking up at his new friends with exceeding pride and gladness. His dirty shoes had left a long streak of mud on the big girl's skirt, but she didn't seem aware of it; instead, she lifted him and tossed him with strong arms, after she had set him on the ground. Roger began to think that there might be ladies who were comparable with, if not equal to, *sahibs*. Then they turned and walked back with him to the gate, and saw him trot into the house.

For a long time neither Herrick nor her mother spoke, then with a little sigh Margaret said, "I fear that is a lonely child."

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PART III

CHAPTER XI

THEIR THIRD MEETING

"Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"
As You Like It.

WHEN Montagu came home Edmund met him in London and they spent a week there together. The brothers were unfeignedly glad to see one another again, and Edmund, full of pride in the fact that he was not going to ask Montagu for money the moment he arrived, was more demonstratively affectionate than he would have felt possible had the other and usual state of things been the case. Montagu had been very patient under his young brother's constant requests for money, but had been compelled some four months before to point out to Edmund that he had already had the lion's share of the money their guardian had left them, and that, although as long as there was shot in the locker he might depend on his elder brother's help, the locker was becoming somewhat empty, and it behooved Edmund to try and live within his income. "If you find that quite impossible," Montagu wrote, "I don't mind making you a small allowance, but I don't like these constant cables for sums which at times I can't lay hands on without overdrawing my account, a thing I hate to do."

Edmund accepted the rebuke in a beautiful spirit of acquiescence and contrition, as he always did accept Montagu's lectures. And now his habitual cheerfulness was increased tenfold by the reflection that he could meet his brother without requiring to force any very pressing bills upon his notice. Bills that were not pressing had practically no existence for Edmund: it was almost as though they were already paid. When tradesmen became, as he called it, "importunate and pestiferous," then and then only did Edmund face his liabilities, with much repentance and lamentation, it is true, combined with a determination to lead a new life of strictest economy and integrity. He was in such a pious frame of mind on Montagu's return and expressed so many virtuous resolutions as to his future conduct that Montagu was tempted to tip him lavishly on the spot; but, mindful of the past, he refrained from presenting his delightful young brother with a cheque for fifty pounds, and contented himself for the present with paying all the hotel bills, theatre tickets, and hansoms during their week in town together.

Far into the night the brother sat talking of old days; but it was only on their last evening in town that Montagu, rather shyly, broached the subject of the William Wycherlys, to find, to his surprise, that Edmund had already made their acquaintance.

"You never told me you'd been down there," Montagu said, somewhat reproachfully. "I suppose little Herrick has grown up—a kind and beautiful girl, I should think?"

"You've hit it, old chap, in that stilted, old-fashioned lingo of yours; that's just what she is—'kind and beautiful.' By Jove, it's a million times more like her than 'ripping' or any of the things one

does say of girls. But she's a bit severe, too, I fancy; she could be jolly down on you as well as kind; I can tell you."

"What's she like?" Montagu asked, looking hard at the "personable stripling" who was sitting on the end of his bed; they had no private sitting-room, and usually finished up the day by inordinately long talks in each other's rooms.

"Well, she's tall and fair and like a May morning, and all that, you know—I'm not literary, and am no good at describing things—and I should say she pretty well rules the neighbourhood, including that crusty old chap who has the big place down there."

"How did you meet her?"

"Oh, I called; thought it was the proper thing to do, as I was down there and they'd got your books and were kind of connections. They were very pleasant and hospitable, and are going to put us both up later on. I suppose you'll go over from old Holt's to call, won't you? He's not far off—Vicar of Surrum, you know, where the Lowenbaums have a place."

"Shall I have to call on the Lowenbaums?" Montagu asked; "you seem pretty chummy with them."

"Oh, you'd better; they're not your sort, but they're quite decent really, very kind and jolly, and do you simply magnificently. I'd like you to call, for they've not been received with very great effusion down there, and feel it rather. By the way, wasn't Mr. William Wycherly in trade or something?"

"Yes, a wine merchant."

"They why do they set themselves up to be so beastly exclusive and refuse to call on this person and the other? People talk a good deal about it down there, I can tell you, and think it rather ridiculous.

Because that old Lord Delafosse took them up so, is no reason why they should give themselves such airs, is it?"

"I can't imagine either Mr. or Mrs. Wycherly putting on airs," Montagu said somewhat stiffly; "and I can't see that they are bound to call on people if they don't want to."

"Well, it's generally considered good form to be friendly in the country; nearly every one else has called on the Lowenbaums."

"You said just now they hadn't been received with great effusion."

"Well, neither have they in the immediate neighbourhood, but all round for fifteen miles and more every one has called, and they subscribe most liberally to everything, and are hospitable as can be, so it's rather rough luck if the Wycherlys and that old reprobate—he was a frightful reprobate, I've been told—try to boycott them. They won't succeed, but it would have been pleasanter if they hadn't tried. And if you can smooth things over a bit, you'll be doing a good turn all round."

"My dear chap," Montagu exclaimed in dismay, "I absolutely decline to call upon the people at all if you imagine I'm going to dictate to the Wycherlys as to whom they should or should not know. It would be ridiculous and impertinent. I'm going down there to stay for a fortnight with my old house-master——"

"Jolly old bore, you'll find him, I should think," Edmund interrupted rather crossly. "He can't forget he's a schoolmaster, and dictates to everybody all round, has meetings for this and classes for that, and is the fussiest old busybody in the county; actually had the cheek to come and ask the Lowenbaums

to bring their house party to a Shakespeare meeting in the afternoon."

"Did they go?" asked Montagu, with interest. Well did he remember Mr. Holt's Shakespearian researches at school.

"*Did* they go? You don't catch the Lowenbaums sitting round much, except in fours at a table with a green cover. My dear old Montagu, when you've satisfied your conscience and your filial affection for your house-master by listening to his interminable jaw for some days, go over to the Lowenbaums and get cheered up. You owe me that much. For your sake I spent three-quarters of an hour in the study at Surrum Vicarage (Mrs. Holt was out), answering questions, and trying to look intelligent. Whatever I *looked,* I'm sure I didn't deceive the old chap, for as I departed I heard him mumble to himself: 'Singularly unlike—empty, empty, empty!' I *was* confoundedly empty, for the old heathen never offered me tea, though it was after four o'clock when I called."

"He had a habit of talking to himself," Montagu said musingly; "it was very disconcerting."

Edmund moved along the bed and flung his arm round his brother's shoulders. "Sometimes," he said, "you say things so exactly like our dear old guardian that you make me feel about six."

Next day Edmund went North to visit some of the Bethune relations who had re-discovered these boys now that they were safely launched in their professions. They had shown considerable hospitality to Edmund when he was on shore. Montagu was included in this last invitation, but pleaded a previous engagement, for his heart turned eagerly towards the Cotswold Hills and all they held for him.

For twenty years the Reverend Haviland Holt had

had a house at Winchester. An old Wykehamist himself, he had absorbed the best traditions of that ancient seat of teaching, but he had in addition acquired in aggravated form the somewhat superior and didactic manner which less fortunate persons, themselves educated at other public schools, are wont to describe as "the Winchester manner."

Now the Winchester manner is by no means common to all Wykehamists. Many of them are, even outwardly, the most modest and delightful of men; nor does the possession of the Winchester manner necessarily argue great self-esteem or vanity in him who manifests it. But it undoubtedly has a somewhat irritating effect on outsiders. When Mr. Holt retired from Winchester to the living of Surrum, on the Cotswold Hills, he was certainly as eager to do his duty in his new sphere of action as he had ever shown himself in his old. His heart was overflowing with goodwill to all the world, and just as this goodwill had found a vent in exacting a certain standard of conduct, and that by no means a low one, from his boys, so he showed an equal zeal in stirring up his neighbours to greater, and if possible more intellectual, activity.

Childless themselves, he and Mrs. Holt had devoted themselves entirely to the boys in their house, loved them dearly, and, what is more important, understood them very fairly well. And the boys, while they grumbled, and occasionally jeered at their housemaster's zeal, generally responded with the affection honest boys are always ready to bestow upon those who like them and wish them well. Not quite so the Cotswold people. They were undoubtedly sporting rather than literary in their sympathies, and although Mr. Holt would have been the first to admit their gen-

eral worthiness, he was not long in arriving at the conclusion that they were "plunged in intellectual sloth." What is more, he did not keep this conviction to himself, and the residents in his part of the Cotswold Hills, unaware of their immersion in anything so degenerate, were annoyed.

Nevertheless, the Vicar of Surrum found certain kindred spirits who had only awaited the advent of a leader to proclaim their desire for self-improvement, and certain of the neighbouring clergy, and many ladies, both matrons and maids, supported Mr. Holt in his endeavours to stimulate the interest of dwellers in the Cotswolds in various high subjects.

Thus it came about that there were University Extension lectures at Marlehouse, and a Shakespeare Society, meeting at each other's houses, was formed with Mr. Holt as president.

It mattered little in whose house the meeting was held, Mr. Holt ruled the meeting. He assorted the parts and insisted on explaining the difficult passages after every scene. Not one note in any annotated edition (and his annotated editions were as the sands of the sea for number) was permitted to escape unread, and he was always quite amiably anxious to encourage timid possessors of still further annotated editions to read their notes aloud to the assembled members. It was he who settled what "cuts" should be made, and arranged what play should be read. Naturally his extremely thorough methods made it impossible that any play could ever be finished at one meeting. In fact, one play was generally spread over four, though each meeting, exclusive of tea, lasted for two hours and a half. Mr. Holt, himself, read well, and was careful to give the good parts to people who had some sense of rhythm and some idea of

elocution; but he would, with curiously incongruous effect, distribute the minor parts in so haphazard a fashion that it generally fell to the lot of some timid maiden lady to impersonate a drunken clown (men were somewhat scarce at these gatherings), and the more violent the language of the character she represented, the weaker grew her voice, so that the next character, infected by her example, generally started in a whisper. It happened that the day after Montagu arrived at Surrum the Shakespeare Society was to meet at the Vicarage, and when he suggested at breakfast time that perhaps he had better go over and call at Bredon Manor House that afternoon, his proposal met with a perfect avalanche of disapproval from both host and hostess.

"My dear fellow, we have been counting upon you!" Mr. Holt exclaimed.

"You must take Orlando in *As You Like It*," Mrs. Holt continued. "Canon Fusby is laid low by influenza. Besides, you'll see Miss Wycherly here; she is taking Rosalind, and a very delightful Rosalind she makes. I feel sure poor Canon Fusby will be dreadfully disappointed, but it's lucky for you, as otherwise I fear you would only have had a very minor part."

"Dear Mrs. Holt, I'd be much safer with a very small part," Montagu pleaded; "I haven't read aloud since I was at Winchester, and you've no idea how badly I shall do it."

"Nonsense, Wycherly, you can study the part this morning," Mr. Holt said with great decision. "We do more than merely read aloud here, I assure you, and I advise you to practise your part at once. We begin to-day at Act IV., Scene I. Mrs. Holt is Celia, and I—I haven't a great deal to do this afternoon—

am the melancholy Jacques. You will find in my study two or three copies of the Warwick edition, the one we use here. Go then, directly after breakfast, for at eleven o'clock we must drive into Marlehouse to do some commissions for Mrs. Holt not unconnected with tea this afternoon. Lunch at one sharp, my dear! The meeting is at two-thirty or two-forty-five. People are only too apt to be unpunctual, but to-day is a beautiful day, so we may expect quite a large gathering. Nothing more, Wycherly? Then you'd better go into the study at once."

Montagu went meekly. His host fussed after him, found him a Shakespeare, found the place in it, read a few lines aloud just to show how it ought to be done, and fussed out again, leaving Montagu staring at the open page.

The drawing-room at Surrum Vicarage was large, yet it looked quite crowded that afternoon when the Shakespeare Society had assembled. In the bow window, with his back to it, and a table covered with annotated editions in front of him, sat the Vicar, in a large armchair of oak. He was, as it were, the jewel in the ring, the other members were but the setting. Montagu sat between a mild old lady who wore blue glasses and a singularly flat black motor-cap, and stout, comfortable Mrs. Holt, who beamed on the assembled company and cast admiring glances in the direction of her husband.

She had introduced Montagu to nearly every one present as "one of our old boys," quite forgetting as a rule to mention his name at all.

There were, in all, some ten ladies, none of them young, and three gentlemen: a curate, an Archdeacon, and an Oxford don, who had retired from Oxford to pursue his archæological studies in a part of the Cots-

wolds where Roman remains were almost plentiful.

One chair only, straight-backed and covered with tapestry, remained vacant. It had an impertinent, unrepentant look, that chair: and Montagu found himself gazing at it quite reproachfully, for it was just opposite.

"Miss Wycherly is late," Mr. Holt said, adjusting his spectacles; "I fear we must begin without her. Perhaps you, Miss Noot," turning to the meek lady in the flat motor-cap, "will kindly read her part until she arrives."

The reading began. Jacques had just remarked that "he had gained his experience," when there was a little bustle in the hall outside. Somebody opened the drawing-room door and the unpunctual member of the Society hurried across the room to the vacant chair with a half-pleading, wholly merry bow, that included the whole company.

The Archdeacon handed her his book, pointed to her speech, and without more delay she dashed into her part: "I had rather have a fool to make me merry, than experience to make me sad: and to travel for it too!"

There was a dreadful pause; for Montagu, who was gazing at Herrick, had laid his book on his knee and forgotten that he was reading Orlando.

Herrick looked across at him and nodded gaily. She did not recognise him, but she knew that he was to be there, and he was the only stranger. In her hurried entrance she had not missed Canon Fusby, and now looked round expectantly, for his greeting as Orlando.

"Wycherly," exclaimed Mr. Holt, with severe rebuke in his voice, "I fear you are not attending."

Montagu's book fell off his knee with a crash;

of course he couldn't find his place at once, and therefore occasioned more delay. Crimson and confused, he at last ejaculated: "Good day and happiness, dear Rosalind," and the play went on.

Presently Montagu became uncomfortably conscious that either he had suddenly started an exceedingly bad cold in the head, or else—horrible thought!—his nose was bleeding.

A handkerchief soon proved this latter supposition to be the correct one.

For three minutes he wrestled with this most annoying of trivial ailments, but in vain. His nose was evidently going in for what Edmund would have called "a good old bleed."

He had been rather subject to this affliction in his youth, but it had entirely ceased to trouble him since he reached years of discretion.

No one can read Shakespeare with a handkerchief firmly stuffed against his nose, and after a muffled mumble or two Montagu gave up the attempt.

He got up from his seat: to reach the door he had to pass Herrick, who looked up at him, her blue eyes dancing with amusement, and whispered:

"Shall I come and put keys down your back, Cousin Montagu?"

Montagu muttered *"Do."* Then all rage and handkerchief, he fled from the room.

"Don't hurry yourself, Wycherly," Mr. Holt called after him; "I will take Orlando."

Montagu slammed the door, and even the handkerchief hardly stifled the word he used.

"Poor boy!" said kindly Mrs. Holt, for the moment oblivious of the Shakespeare meeting; "his nose used to bleed most dreadfully at Winchester, I remember."

"So it did!" exclaimed her husband; "in form too, which was curious, for he always knew his work."

"I'd better go after him, I think," Mrs Holt said anxiously, half rising from her seat. The president nodded his permission, and she followed her unfortunate guest.

She found him standing at his washhand-stand trying a cold water cure, with small effect.

"You'd better lie down on your bed, my dear," she said kindly, "and we'll try cotton-wool."

Montagu chose the floor. With his nostrils well plugged he lay flat on his back, gazing at the ceiling, and Mrs. Holt was persuaded to return to her rendering of Celia with much reluctance and reiterated expressions of concern and commiseration.

During the first three minutes of solitude Montagu lay swearing softly. Then he began to laugh. "A piece of coal in my eye the last time," he reflected, "a bleeding nose this. Next time I meet her I suppose I shall tumble over something and sprawl on the ground in front of her."

Edmund's phrase "a May morning and all that" came back to him, and he lay seeing visions of Herrick in the ceiling. There were big Parma violets in her brown fur hat: violets in the laces of her blouse, itself the colour of pale violets, and her bright hair was a little blown about by her windy drive. What a white, firm chin she had, and how she dimpled when she smiled! Just before she came in Montagu had looked round the room and reflected that seldom had he seen a more sad-coloured selection of people. From the moment of her entrance till he made the horrid discovery of his nose's treachery he had forgotten there were any others. The room held Herrick and Shakespeare and himself—and then came banish-

ment. With banishment came all the other members of the Shakespeare Society, and Mr. Holt was reading his part and Herrick was dimpling and smiling and making barefaced love to Mr. Holt, when if only he, the wretched Montagu, had not possessed such an idiotic nose he might have been the recipient of all those adorable speeches.

Confound! confound! confound!——

Even the most malicious of noses cannot bleed for ever. Mrs. Holt's curative measures were entirely successful, and Montagu joined the Shakespearian students as they adjourned to the dining-room for tea.

He dutifully supplied various sympathetic and hungry old ladies with muffins and bread and butter, while Herrick, as the youngest member of the party, handed cups and carried sugar and cream to people in distant corners. At last every one, even kind Mrs. Holt, was fairly started, and Montagu had the felicity of carrying a cup of tea to Herrick herself.

"You never came with that key," he murmured reproachfully.

"You were in better hands than mine; but I must just say this: if you had had any discretion you would have chosen the time when we do discussion and notes, rather than the actual play, to escape. There will be nothing but notes now till we all depart. We've finished the play. And in common decency you can't disappear again."

"You don't think I did it on purpose, do you?" Montagu exclaimed in an agonised whisper. "I was never so annoyed in my life—such an idiotic thing—and I had such a nice part, too."

"You haven't changed very much," Herrick said suddenly. "I didn't remember you just at first, but directly you were half smothered in handkerchief I

remembered you quite distinctly. It's very jolly to see you again, and we've taken great care of your books. When are you coming to see them? Four ladies over there have nothing to eat, do attend to them."

"I should have come to-day to see Mrs. Wycherly, but for this confounded meeting. When may I come?"

"Four ladies," Herrick began again, and Montagu seized two large plates of cakes and sped across the room to press cake upon people who were already supplied with muffin. When he got back to his own corner of the long table behind Mrs. Holt, the Archdeacon had taken his place and was animatedly discussing a recent golf tournament with Herrick.

Shakespearian researches appear to stimulate the carnal appetites, for tea was a somewhat lengthy meal. At last, however, they adjourned to the drawing-room, and once more Montagu found himself seated, rather in the shadow, and opposite to Herrick: this time with no duties save those of a somewhat inattentive listener to Mr. Holt's questions and explanations.

With his ears he heard his old master observing that "poor snake" was a term of reproach equivalent to "poor wretch or poor creature," while his eyes and brain were busy with the discoveries that by candlelight Herrick's eyes looked quite dark, and that little tendrils of hair caressed the fur of her hat and caught the light in a hundred golden curves and spirals; that when she smiled, her dimples were uneven, and when she looked down her eyelashes made soft semi-circular shadows upon her cheeks. And when she looked up she gazed at the cornice of the ceiling on several occasions, and Montagu wondered

why, and tilted her head back just the least little bit, he was seized by such an overpowering desire to kiss her then and there as turned him hot all over for very shame.

Suddenly Herrick yawned, a good wide, healthy yawn, and before her sheltering hand could cover her offence, it was revealed to him that her teeth were white and even and sound to the very back; not small teeth, not the least like pearls, but strong and square —the kind of teeth that looked capable of cracking nuts, even Brazil nuts, as indeed they were.

Just then Montagu's ears awoke to their duties; Mr. Holt was in the middle of a long disquisition on a book by Vincentio Saviolo, 1594, entitled "Of Honour and Honourable Quarrels," which might account for Herrick's yawn.

Five minutes later Mr. Holt's solemn manservant opened the door, announcing in a hushed undertone, "Miss Wycherly's carriage." Other carriages were announced immediately afterwards, and the meeting was perforce concluded, for Cotswold people have the greatest objection to keep their horses waiting in the cold.

Montagu followed Herrick into the hall, helped her into her long fur-lined driving coat, and went out with her into the dark drive, to tuck the rug well round her when she was seated, reins in hand, on the box of her little cart.

"I've made it all right with Mrs. Holt; we shall expect you to lunch to-morrow," she said, bending down to peer into his face in the darkness, "and then you can inspect your books and make sure we haven't torn pages out, made thumb-marks on first editions, or done anything dreadful. You will come, won't you?"

"I shall come," said Montagu with stern determination in his tone.

"Right, John," cried Herrick. The pony sprang forward, John leapt up behind, the lamps of the cart flashed as they turned out of the drive, and Montagu, staring after them, was nearly run over by Archdeacon Thurlow's coachman, who drove up at that moment to fetch his master.

CHAPTER XII

"WYCHELLY SAHIB" TO THE RESCUE

"It is an order."

THE house and country around Bredon were so sharply graven upon the tablets of Montagu's mind that, although he had only been there once, the whole landscape seemed friendly and familiar. November, that year, was mild and sunny, and as he rode up to the Manor House he was acutely and pleasurably conscious that there was in the air the same damp freshness, the same good smell of fallen beech leaves and brown earth, that he remembered so distinctly on his former visit.

He knew that he was early, but in consideration of the fact that his steed was by no means fiery (being the confidential charger ridden by Mr. Holt, who had taken to horse exercise since he came to Surrum) he gave himself plenty of time.

Who can define the warm welcoming quality of old houses? As Montagu stood with his reins over his arm at Bredon front door, the very bell clanging in some distant region seemed to peal joyously in his honour. And when host, hostess and Herrick met him in the hall, and they all sat round the fire there on high-backed oaken settles; when Gawaine laid his beautiful head on Montagu's knee and adopted him there and then as one of the family, and a fussy fox-terrier and an Aberdeen came and rubbed themselves

against his gaiters, he felt that here indeed was home; what he had worked for, waited for, dreamed of.

Margaret had a good look at her visitor while they were at lunch. He was still very thin, but his shoulders were broader, and she decided that he no longer looked delicate. His eyes were just as kind and frank under the broad, calm forehead, but the hair on the temples was thinning and was touched with grey. His manner had not lost its pleasant deference, but it had gained in confidence; and there was about him that subtle, indefinable atmosphere of the man in authority, of the man who accepts responsibility fearlessly while fully recognising its weight.

Margaret was not wont to judge hastily of any one, but she had decided in that first meeting with Montagu that he was trustworthy. Now that she saw him again, her opinion was confirmed. She knew, moreover, that she was going to like him, and to like him well, and she determined there and then that he should be made to feel at home at Bredon Manor; and when such a woman as Margaret means that, lucky is the stranger within her gates.

At lunch, Montagu sat opposite Herrick, who was as usual very hungry, and at first devoted her attention almost exclusively to her roast mutton, while the guest conversed with her parents.

"Did Miss Wycherly tell you how I distinguished myself at the Shakespearian meeting?" Montagu asked, never doubting but that she had, and preparing to make fun of himself.

"I don't think she said you were particularly dramatic or anything of that sort," William answered. "I fear, if you were, your histrionic efforts were lost upon Herrick, who goes about with the unshaken conviction that nobody reads as well as she does."

"But didn't Miss Wycherly tell you what happened to me?" Montagu asked, rather surprised.

"No, I didn't," said Herrick, flushing a little. "It's the kind of misfortune that is more amusing when described by the victim, don't you think?"

"It was awfully nice of you not to give me away," Montagu said gratefully, "but I wonder you resisted the temptation."

"What did happen?" asked Margaret, looking from her daughter's flushed face to Montagu's, which was radiant with astonished gratitude.

He described his calamity, assisted by graphic interpolations from Herrick, and when lunch was over they all went to sit in the hall again.

"By the way, the wife of a friend of mine, Mrs. Reeve, is living quite near here. I must go and look her up this afternoon. Have you met her, Mrs. Wycherly?" Montagu asked.

"We have called, but we haven't seen much of her yet," Margaret answered. "She seems to have a great many engagements; but we hope to see more of her by and by . . . She's wonderfully handsome!" she added.

"She was quite the beauty of Khafadia. Have you come across her little boy at all? He is such a good little chap, and a tremendous pal of mine."

"He's a tremendous pal of mine, too," said Herrick, who, seated next her father, was trying to catch the rings of smoke he made on a slim forefinger. "I'm devoted to him. He's the dearest little boy!"

"I promised to report on him to his father directly I got down here; I must catch this mail too, for I wrote to Reeve last week to tell him I was coming. How do you think the little chap is looking? This splendid air should do him no end of good."

"I don't think he is a strong child," Margaret said decidedly. "I don't think he looks well, and I fear this place is rather cold for him. It is, of course, bracing, but at this time of year, it's very damp."

Montagu looked grave. "I don't know how I can write that to Reeve," he said uncomfortably. "He is wrapped up in the child, and it would worry him dreadfully."

"Can *nothing* be done for his deafness?" Herrick asked. "It is so sad for such a baby."

Montagu dropped the lighted match he held, and William Wycherly put his foot upon it, for his guest ignored the mischief he might have done to the heavy Persian carpet and sat staring at Herrick. "Roger deaf!" he exclaimed. "He never was deaf in Khafadia. How dreadful! Has it just come on? I'm sure Reeve didn't know it when I left or he would have told me."

"I think it was after measles," Margaret said gently. "It is quite likely Mrs. Reeve did not want to worry her husband till she had seen what could be done. We have not, of course, been able to discuss the subject with her, for we have only seen her once—when we called. We were out when she returned our call, and she was unable to come to lunch when we asked her. Herrick has seen a good deal of little Roger; he often comes here, and she often takes him out. She can tell you more about him than I can. Mrs. Reeve has been most kind in allowing him to come whenever she asked him."

Montagu stood up. "I am really dreadfully distressed about this," he said. "I must see Mrs. Reeve at once. I promised Reeve, and I must keep my word. Miss Wycherly, do you know if Roger has seen an aurist?"

Herrick, too, had risen, and the expression on her face brought to Montagu's mind his brother's words, "She could be jolly down on you as well as kind," and he knew that in her heart she was "jolly down" on Cynthia, though all she said was:

"I don't *think* he has seen a specialist; I don't think he has seen any one. But I may be wrong; he may have forgotten or misunderstood . . ." She paused a minute, then said passionately, "Oh, Cousin Montagu, *do* something, do something quickly! You know Mrs. Reeve; you can talk to her. Roger is not properly——"

"Hush, Herrick," Margaret interrupted hastily. "You must not say things like that. Mrs. Reeve is very young, and has probably had no experience in the management of delicate children." Then, turning to Montagu: "When I called she told me how intimate you were with them in Khafadia, so she will tell you all about it."

"If Montagu knows Mrs. Reeve so well, it will be quite easy for him to do something," Herrick said. "Go and see her now at once," she added, "before she goes out for the afternoon. You can walk; it's quite near. I'll show you the way from the end of the drive; then you can come back here for tea and get your horse. Hurry! or she may have gone out."

Montagu hurried, but even in the midst of his very real perturbation and distress he noted that Herrick had called him by his Christian name.

"Oughtn't you to have something on your head?" he asked anxiously, as, bare-headed, she hurried him down the drive.

"Not when it's warm, like to-day. You see, I'm

always out in the garden, and I do hate hats! Why, there *is* Roger! Oh, the *dears!*"

They had reached a turn in the drive, and as she spoke Montagu saw three boys coming towards them. A little boy was in the middle; the two bigger ones each held his hand, and were talking loudly to one another over his head.

Roger looked radiant; his pale cheeks were quite pink. Pride was in his port at walking on such friendly and familiar terms with those "big boys," Ronnie and Tommy. But as they came nearer he suddenly disengaged his hands and rushed forward.

He might be deaf, but his sight was of the keenest and his heart of the most faithful. In the Manor House drive stood Wychelly Sahib.

Shouting his name, Roger ran towards his friend as fast as his short, thin legs could carry him, and Montagu caught the child up in his arms and held him close.

Herrick went forward to Ronnie and Tommy, holding out both her hands. "Now this is really nice of you!" she cried. "You've just come in the nick of time to help me spread apples in the apple-room. There are such a lot!"

"Miss Wycherly," said Tommy earnestly, looking up at the tall girl with the rosiest of honest round faces, "we've been for him twice before, but he couldn't come; then to-day, when we'd got him, we thought we'd like to come and see you."

Herrick understood.

"I don't think I quite meant what I said that day I was so cross," she said slowly. "Anyway, I take it all back now and apologise."

The boys looked so supremely uncomfortable that

she hastened to turn her attention to Roger, who was sitting on Montagu's shoulder, beaming on all the world while he played a muddy tattoo with his boots on his friend's most cherished waistcoat.

"He says his mother has already driven out, but that she will be in at tea-time. May I wait here till it's time to go and see her, or are you busy?" he asked.

"We are going to be awfully busy, but you may come and be busy with us," Herrick answered, smiling at him radiantly, while dimples danced in and out on her cheeks in most distracting fashion. "We'll all go and sort apples; up this path is the quickest way to the loft."

William had gone to the library to write letters, but Margaret sat on in the hall awaiting her daughter's return. Her usually busy hands lay idle in her lap, and she stared into the red fire, thinking. Why should Herrick, who was only too much given to making fun of her contemporaries, have refrained in Montagu's case? The little scene at lunch recurred to Margaret's mind as 'a presaging straw, and quite against her will she found herself asking, "Sits the wind in that quarter?"

Why was Herrick so long away? Could she have been silly enough to go hatless down the road with Montagu to Mrs. Reeve's very gate? Margaret had not much faith in her daughter's discretion, but surely, surely she could not have done this. As for Montagu . . . Margaret shook her head, sighed, then laughed to herself. She had seen these symptoms too often in the young men who hovered about Herrick, wherever she was, to be deceived.

But, of course, to imagine anything already was absurd. In all circumstances it was absurd, impos-

sible! Still, what on earth could Herrick be doing that she didn't come back? Margaret yielded to what she herself stigmatised as a "fit of the fidgets," put on her hat and coat, and went out into the grounds to look for her daughter.

It was a still afternoon and beginning to get dark as Margaret went towards the stables, thinking Herrick might have gone to see her new hunter, presented to her by Lord Delafosse on condition that she should give up playing hockey that winter. She heard laughter and voices proceeding from a yard where there were the outbuildings used to store various garden produce.

A ladder with a rail led to the apple-loft, and as Margaret prepared to ascend she heard Herrick say, "No, Roger, you must *not* put the Blenheims beside the Worcester Pearmains; these have got to be eaten first, they won't keep—Tommy, you will certainly be ill if you eat any more."

"*Now,* Mr. Wycherly, for the competition. These apples are just the same size, and I'll bet you sixpence I can take the largest bite. Tommy shall judge. Now!"

A moment's silence, a sound of munching, and Herrick's little scream of triumph: "There! I told you so! Mine's *much* the biggest piece!"

Margaret ascended the ladder and looked in at the open door. There was a great deal of noise, for the whole party was talking at once and at the top of its united voice. Montagu and Herrick were seated on a huge overturned clothes-basket, both eating apples, while the three little boys, similarly employed, were additionally active in spreading the apples from another basket on one of the wide shelves. The last red sunshine streamed through a west window,

touching Herrick's hair to little tongues of flame, where it caught the light. Both faces were in shadow, but even so it was clear that "the nice new cousin with the straight nose" was enjoying himself exceedingly.

As Margaret's figure appeared in the doorway Herrick waved her apple triumphantly, exclaiming, "We have worked so hard! *Won't* Brinkworth be pleased! See what a lot we've done; he can't call *this* 'fancy gardening.' I believe we've laid out five hundred apples this afternoon!"

"Well, you'd better all come in now, for it's getting dark," Margaret said; then a little dryly, "I thought Montagu was going to call on Mrs. Reeve."

"So he was," Herrick hastened to explain, "but we met Roger and these boys in the drive, and Roger told us Mrs. Reeve won't be in till tea-time; but perhaps they'd better go now."

"Can't I stay to tea here wiv Wychelly Sahib?" Roger pleaded.

"I must go and see your mother, sonnie, and I'd like you to take me," Montagu said virtuously. "Do you think we might both go and wash first? Our hands are black."

They all went back to the house; Montagu and Roger were washed and brushed, and started together for Cowper's Cottage. Roger was torn between the desire to stay to tea with Ronnie and Tommy and "Hayick" and that of going with Wychelly Sahib. His faithful little heart finally decided on the latter course, and they started together. The drive was very dark after the brightness of the hall, and it was Montagu who heard the patter of light, racing feet

behind them and turned. In the grey gloom of the November afternoon he could just see Herrick.

"I wanted to tell you," she whispered breathlessly, "that I'm going to a little dance in Marlehouse to-night, and I shall see our doctor. I'll ask him who is the best man for ears and get the name and address, and I'll make John post it to you as we drive home. To-day is Wednesday. If you ask Mrs. Reeve to let you take Roger up to London on Friday you could wire to the aurist to-morrow and make an appointment for Friday morning; then you could catch the mail to Mr. Reeve that night and tell him what the aurist says. I've thought it all out this afternoon while we were sorting apples."

"I will—if I dare," Montagu whispered, "but you can see it's rather a difficult and delicate business."

"It's not impossible," Herrick said decidedly. "I think it's your duty to do it. I'd have done it myself long ago, only every one would have been so angry—taken him up to town I mean, not written to Mr. Reeve. Anyway, I'll send you the address. It may be some quite little thing that can be soon cured." She was gone, out of sight, almost before Montagu had recovered his first astonishment at her behest.

Roger pulled at his hand: "What was Hayick whispering about?" he asked. "Does she want us to go back again to tea? Do let us."

At the dance in Marlehouse the doctor was in his glory, as he always was on such occasions. Beaming and rubbing his hands, he strolled about the ball-room digging his cronies in the ribs and winking in a fashion suggestive of untold orgies. He never danced anything but "squares" himself, but was indefatigable in finding partners for the pretty girls. This

good office was not needed by Herrick, who annoyed her grandmother by her readiness to dance with all and sundry provided they could dance. As a partner Herrick infinitely preferred a bank clerk who danced well to any scion of any noble house whatsoever, were he clumsy or heavy-footed.

On arrival she boldly sought Dr. Ford and asked him to sit out the first extra with her, and when the time came they sat among the chaperons on a raised daïs, and Herrick, with her usual directness, went straight for the question she had most at heart. "Tell me," she said, "who is the very best man for deafness in London?"

The doctor turned and stared at her. "Why?" he demanded; "you're not deaf, are you?"

"No," said Herrick, "if I was I should have come to you long ago."

"Then what d'you want to know for?"

"For a friend of mine who is deaf. I want him to see the very best man there is."

The doctor looked hard at Herrick, and decided in his own mind that she was far too pretty to waste on any deaf chap; so he said, "Don't hold out many hopes to your friend if he has been deaf long. Deaf he will probably remain. Even the very best men confess they can do very little for deafness."

This was discouraging, but Herrick was not to be balked; "He has only been deaf a very little while and has seen nobody——" she began.

"Then the man's a fool," the doctor interrupted angrily.

Herrick gave a little scream of laughter, for she saw exactly what the doctor thought. "No, he's not," she said indignantly; "he's the greatest dear. Now be kind and tell me who is the best man, and write

the address on my programme with your nice little fountain pen."

The doctor produced his fountain-pen and wrote the desired name and address on the back of Herrick's programme.

"Spence is the best man," he growled; "but mark my words, young lady, if you're thinking of getting married to a man that's deaf, *don't*. A pretty girl like you ought to manage to get a chap that's sound in wind and limb, anyhow. Don't you do it for some confounded silly sentimental reason."

Herrick slipped her hand under the doctor's arm, and gave it a little squeeze. "I should marry a man with one eye or one leg if I loved him," she said, "so deafness would not make the smallest difference. Thank you awfully for the address. I'll let you know if Mr. Spence does him any good."

"Our dance, I think," said somebody standing in front of Herrick, and she tripped off with a man the doctor did not know.

The doctor sat where he was and gazed searchingly round the room. He knew every young man there but two, and for the rest of the evening he pursued those two with suspicious, hostile glances, somewhat to their surprise, as they came from the next county and were quite innocent of having given offence to the doctor. But they danced with Herrick.

The doctor went and sat down by Margaret, and she wondered why he asked so many odd questions. She was so tired that she fell asleep in the carriage going home, and never noticed that they stopped for a minute at the post-office.

CHAPTER XIII

DIPLOMACY

". . . And she is emptied of it now!
Outright now!—how miraculously gone
All of the grace—had she not strange grace once?"
ROBERT BROWNING.

THE walk to Cowper's Cottage was quite a short one, but it gave Montagu time to make sorrowfully sure that little Roger was decidedly deaf. In all the noise and happy laughter of the apple-sorting it had not been apparent, but now in the quiet country road, alone with the child, the small hand clasped warm and confiding in his own, Wychelly Sahib was troubled and perplexed.

All the way Roger chattered about Khafadia. He had forgotten nothing. He asked for his ayah, Mongolo, the butler, the sweeping-boy, his father's syce, the very Dhirzee who sat working in the verandah at the side of the house. And the more Roger prattled the more clearly did Montagu seem to see the gaunt worn figure of the Commissioner sitting in his office and awaiting the English mail with all the passionate expectancy of a lonely heart.

How could he write this thing?

He tried to tell himself that the child did not look ill, that he looked better than he had looked in his beloved Khafadia; but to set against this was the fact that he was flushed and happy and excited, as Herrick had pointed out during the afternoon.

Then her last words occurred to him: "Perhaps it is some quite little thing that can be cured."

Montagu determined there and then that he would be content to seem officious, interfering, impertinent, even, if only he might *know* the best, or worst, before he wrote to the Commissioner.

Cynthia had returned; they were admitted by Grimes, slim, trim and neat in black frock, whitest of collars and cuffs, and beautiful muslin apron. She captured Roger in the hall and sent him up the pretty winding staircase before Montagu had recovered from his astonishment at the dictatorial tone in which she addressed the child.

When he was about five steps up Roger peeped between the banisters. "You'll come and see me before you go, won't you?" he pleaded.

"Why can't you come in and see mother with me now, old chap?" Montagu asked, forgetful that Roger could not hear his lowered voice.

"Master Roger is never allowed to come down while drawin'-room tea's going on," said Grimes, tossing her head. "There's several 'ere already. Wot name, please?"

Montagu nodded violently to Roger, looked down in some dismay at his muddy boots and gaiters, and followed Grimes's announcement of his name into Mrs. Reeve's drawing-room.

It seemed quite full of people, and for a moment he could not find his hostess in the dim pink light of the shaded lamps.

Then he saw her seated behind the little gate-leg tea-table, radiant in health and good looks, well dressed, well groomed, handsomer than ever.

Cynthia rose and held out her hand, exclaiming:

"Here you are at last, Mr. Wycherly; I have

been feeling rather neglected that you did not call before. You have been home nearly a month, haven't you?"

Montagu bowed over the fair, extended hand. "I've only been at Surrum two days," he said. "I should have come yesterday, but my host had a party in the afternoon and I couldn't get away."

Cynthia presented him to her other guests. There were four. Mrs. Lowenbaum, who looked as though she were in some mysterious way shaken into her clothes till they couldn't hold an ounce more, so stout was she, so exceedingly well fitting they; her face was large featured, unmistakably Jewish, good-natured, and its size was somewhat exaggerated by a small, top-heavy hat, perched on flamboyant, much-waved black hair. Priceless furs lay on the sofa behind her, and she was hung profusely with chains, pendants, and stones of many costly kinds.

Miss Lowenbaum was pretty, black-haired, with the brilliant colouring and vivacious expression which is common among Jewesses in youth. She was plump, plainly dressed in the severest of tweed gowns, and of jewellery wore not even a tie pin.

On a first glance at one of the men Montagu wondered whether, since he was last at home, it had become the fashion to take one's chauffeur into society, when he discovered that the gentleman in motor kit was Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum. Mr. Brooke completed the quartette, a somewhat shadowy individual who confined his communications to "Dash it all, you know," and "Now you're rottin' me, you know you are." He was not, however, as stupid as he appeared, and his manner quite changed in the City, where he was well known as a singularly shrewd member of the Stock Exchange. He kept his simplicity for the coun-

try, where it was effective. So stupid a man must be of the utmost integrity.

The introductions concluded, Montagu subsided into a chair between his hostess and the Chesterfield that supported the bulky person of Mrs. Lowenbaum.

Cynthia gave him a cup of cold tea and smiled upon him most graciously.

She was pleased with Montagu for appearing at that particular moment. Yes, assuredly he was distinguished looking, this tall, spare man with the agreeable voice. He would impress the Lowenbaums, and Cynthia was very desirous of impressing the Lowenbaums. So she left Montagu to talk to Mrs. Lowenbaum while she entertained the others.

Montagu longed intensely that they should all depart, but in the meantime he found Mrs. Lowenbaum an unexacting neighbour. She confided to him that the country bored her to extinction, and that were it not for the possibility of motorin' up to town every week she would not be able to support existence at Surrum. "You see, I'm not exactly the figure for huntin' or trampin' with the guns, or playin' golf; and bridge afternoon *and* evenin' gets on my nerves, so as I can't sleep, and what is one to do?" she demanded pathetically. "I often say to Mr. Lowenbaum, 'Benjamin, I wish you'd never built the Grange, that I do'; but Benjamin and Gerald is all for sport, and so's Mirry, but I shall be glad and thankful to get back to Fitzjohn's Avenue, I can tell you: not but what the Grange is a comfortable house enough—electric light throughout, and hot air, and well grates, and all that, but it's dull for me even with the house full, as it generally is week-ends—it's dull, and I shall be thankful when February comes and we go back. No waiting till May for me; in February

I go back . . . You live in India, too, do you? Nice place, India, so I'm told; very cheery company and plenty goin' on. Gerald talks of goin' to India to shoot tigers. Have you shot any tigers? Most excitin' I should think it was. Well, I hope we shall see you often at Surrum, Mr. Wycherly; we keep open house, and are always pleased to see our neighbours. You play bridge? Not much? Oh, we'll soon mend that: I except you're a first-class player really, though."

Montagu sat listening to Mrs. Lowenbaum's gentle flow of commonplace, putting in the necessary word here and there and from time to time catching Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum's remarks to Cynthia, which seemed to bear chiefly upon the advisability of discarding from a weak, not a strong suit, varied by Miss Lowenbaum's chaff of Mr. Brooke and his inevitable "Now you're rottin' me, you know you are."

And it seemed to Montagu as though the pretty rose-coloured room with its firelight and fresh chintzes was a dream or a vision, and that although with his bodily eyes he saw Cynthia Reeve's drawing-room, yet to the eyes of his soul that thin, tired-looking man waiting for the mail in his office at Khafadia was far more real and vivid; and he longed that these people should go, and leave him to do that which he had come to do.

For the first time in all his intercourse with Cynthia he was acutely conscious of a certain artificiality in her manner that jarred upon him. The studied droop of her eyelashes, so familiar and admired by him in Khafadia, irritated him here; perhaps because he had spent a large portion of that afternoon gazing into eyes that always frankly met his own. Young eyes,

that were yet pleasantly reminiscent of other eyes, old and infinitely dear to him: with a little start he discovered that Herrick's eyes were like his guardian's, and that Mrs. Lowenbaum was saying something about their "motor bein' a bit late."

At last it came; the Lowenbaums with cordial farewells went forth into the night, and he was left alone with Cynthia.

"I should have come directly after lunch, but we met Roger, and he told us you were out. What does the doctor say about his deafness?" Montagu asked with singular directness.

"Who were 'we'?" asked Cynthia in her turn, "and who told you Roger was deaf?"

"I've been with him all the afternoon, and was most distressed to notice it, knowing how much it must worry you," Montagu answered with a little more diplomacy. "I was lunching at the Manor House, and Miss Wycherly came down the drive with me to show me the way to Cowper's Cottage, and then we met Roger with those little boys. You see, I shall be writing to the Commissioner this mail, as I promised to give him first-hand news of you both. What is being done for Roger?"

Cynthia stole a glance sideways at Montagu from under her long eyelashes. He looked very straight at her, and she felt a little frightened. She was puzzled and annoyed by this catechism. It was plain that he had sat out the Lowenbaums simply to talk about Roger.

Always Roger.

Even that friendly girl, Herrick Wycherly, would, when she met Cynthia, everlastingly talk about Roger, as though he were a topic of entrancing interest. Mrs.

Reeve rather liked Herrick, and was immensely gratified that the Wycherlys had called upon her, and had not yet called upon the Lowenbaums, although they had been far longer in the place . . .

Cynthia was conscious that Montagu awaited her answer. No sentimental interest could be extracted from this silence. His attitude towards her was no longer that of a distant worshipper . . . What on earth did he mean by daring to question her like this?

"Will you be kind enough to ring the bell?" she said coldly. "It's time the tea-things were taken away."

When the parlour-maid had come and gone Montagu leant forward in his chair. "Dear Mrs. Reeve," he said, "I fear you think I am interfering and officious, but I would beg you to remember that your husband is one of my dear friends and that I am devoted to Roger. Do tell me what aurist has seen him, and what he thinks."

"No specialist has seen him," Cynthia said slowly. "We did not discover the deafness until quite recently, and I have small faith in a local man for such things. I prefer to wait until we are in town again. Then I can take him myself to a first-class man. Roger is not nearly so deaf as he makes out—he can hear quite well when he pays attention; but, of course, he must see some one soon. I shall be in town for shopping before Christmas, and I'll try and take him up then—though often, I think, children are far better left alone. People are far too fond of rushing to doctors nowadays for every little thing."

"But deafness isn't a little thing," Montagu broke in; "it's an awful thing for a man. What does the Commissioner say about it?"

"My husband does not know yet, Mr. Wycherly, and I do hope you won't write and worry him unnecessarily. Everything possible will be done, all in good time." And Cynthia leant back in her chair and looked at Montagu as though he were not there. She had cultivated the art to perfection, and she considered that dignity could no further go.

In this instance, however, it failed of its effect. Montagu squared his shoulders, drew his chair a little nearer to Cynthia's, and prepared to do battle in his own fashion.

"Now, Mrs. Reeve, you must listen to me. We are old friends, and surely if any one may be allowed to do anything for you, I'm that man. I can quite understand your dread of going to the aurist with Roger; let *me* take him. I'm going up to town on Friday for the day, anyway. I'll fetch him and bring him back, and take the most enormous care of him. I don't think he'd mind going with me in the least, and then your heart will be set at rest; and if, as I very much hope, I bring good news, think how jolly it will be for all of us. *Please,* dear Mrs. Reeve, let me do this much for you."

Cynthia's mouth grew less obstinate during this long speech. Montagu's voice was very persuasive, his face was very earnest. And he wanted really to do it for her. Not for Roger, nor another, but for her. After all there are many ways of showing devotion, and Montagu had never done anything like other men. He was ready to be her adorer here, even as in Khafadia. . . .

"It is really very kind of you," she said slowly. "You don't know how it has worried me, and how I have dreaded . . . if you are sure . . ."

Montagu gave a great sigh of relief. "Then that

is settled, and I will come for Roger at nine o'clock on Friday morning, and bring him back to you by tea-time. You don't know how I thank you for allowing me to do this for you—how proud I feel that you will trust me to do it. . . ."

Cynthia looked very pleased. "I wouldn't allow anybody else to do it," she said softly.

This time there was a little silence that quite satisfied Cynthia's sense of what was suitable in the circumstances.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAGICIAN

"Out in the city sounds begin."—R. L. S.

WHEN Roger woke on Friday morning he was conscious of feeling unusually important. In the first place he was to have his breakfast a whole hour earlier than usual. The night before his mother had impressed this necessity upon Gegg, the parlour-maid. And he was to go and see his mother in her room before he started, before he went away for a whole day with Wychelly Sahib.

He was to wear his thickest reefer and his new boots. He wished very much that he might have yellow gaiters like the rest of the little boys on the Cotswolds, and he determined to moot this important question with Wychelly Sahib when they met that morning.

That he was going to see a doctor about his deafness was a comparatively unimportant item in the day's programme: the main, tremendous, the beatific fact was that he was to spend this day, all this day, in the society of Wychelly Sahib. He wished it might have been elsewhere than in London. Roger had a poor opinion of London: people were so rude and hustling and jostling, that there really seemed no advantage in being a sahib there. No one made way. Roger had on several occasions gone in 'buses with Grimes, and he detested 'buses. Stairs of any kind

are difficult to the Anglo-Indian child at first, but stairs that sway and bump and leap from under one's feet are detestable and alarming.

Still, an unstable staircase with the society of Wychelly Sahib was better than solid ground without him, and Roger took comfort in this reflection.

When Wychelly Sahib at last arrived he came in a cab, a somewhat ancient and ramshackle cab from the mews at Marlehouse, but Roger thought it a resplendent and most comfortable vehicle, and remarked cheerfully as they jolted away: "What a pleasant smell of mould, isn't there?—like a 'rickshaw after the rains."

The journey was pure delight. They had a carriage to themselves, and at Swindon Wychelly Sahib and he went into the refreshment-room and bought Banbury cakes and biscuits and nice hard chocolate in silver paper. Roger had been too excited to eat his early breakfast, and he found these provisions extremely comforting; when they were consumed he and Wychelly Sahib brushed the crumbs off each other, and Roger sat on his friend's knee and looked out of the window.

"Will that doctor be able to undeaf me, do you think?" Roger asked presently.

"I hope so," Montagu answered. "He may not be able to do it all at once, but he may show you how to do things that will cure you by and by."

"What kind of things?"

"Well, really, sonnie, I can't tell you, for I know very little about it."

Roger was thoughtful for a minute, then another cause of anxiety occurred to him. "Won't it be very cold on the top of a 'bus to-day?"

"Much too cold for you and me, that's quite cer-

tain," Montagu said with a shiver. "We'll go in a hansom all by our two selves, and be quite cosy."

Roger flung his arms round Montagu's neck, crying ecstatically: "Oh, I do feel such a sahib again now you've come; nobody can push me or smack me to-day."

"But why *should* any one push you or smack you?"

"*They* do," said Roger bitterly. "They pushes me out of the way; I hate English servants 'cept Golding—he calls me 'sir,' and says I'm a nice little gentleman; he's a very kind man."

"But, surely," said Montagu, "your own ayah doesn't push you or smack you when you're good?"

"That's just it," said Roger. "I haven't got an own ayah; I've on'y got a little bit of three ayahs, and ze're all rather cross, and I'm never good there. I'm good at Hayick's house, though," he added with some pride. "She thinks I'm very good. D'you love Hayick, Wychelly Sahib?"

Wychelly Sahib's reply was made in so low a tone that Roger failed to catch it, but he forgot to ask again, because just then the train slowed up into Paddington Station, and the excitement of hailing and getting into a hansom drove every other thought from his mind.

Mr. Spence lived in a very grand house in a very large square. Innumerable picture papers were arranged upon the table of the waiting-room, and there were desks in the room where people might fill up their time by writing letters if they had to wait long. The carpets were thick and soft, and the house exceedingly still and quiet. No one else was in the

waiting-room just then, and they had not to wait long.

Roger held Montagu's hand very tight as they walked through the wide, carpeted hall to a room at the back. His heart was beating loudly, and in his ears was that rushing, confused noise that was there so often lately—that tiresome, disagreeable noise that Grimes always said was "in his 'ed" when he asked her about it.

Mr. Spence was a little gentleman, dark and small and rather ugly, but Roger thought his eyes looked kind and friendly, and he spoke in a beautifully clear voice, not loudly, but so distinctly that it was a pleasure to listen to him.

He made Roger sit in a chair facing a big window through which Roger could see a little garden, a dingy, melancholy-looking little garden, where the grass was of quite a different green from the grass at Bredon.

He looked at Roger's throat, and he looked at his ears, and he looked up his nose.

Then he nodded, and said so low that only Montagu heard him: "Just as I thought from your letter."

Roger sat still and patient. He choked when his throat was examined, but then everybody does that.

"Now," said Mr. Spence, "I'm going to blow some air up your nose and it may make rather a noise, but it won't hurt you. You take a sip of water, and when I say 'Now!' you swallow it."

Roger practised this three times, and then Mr. Spence blew the air up his nose with an indiarubber tube that had a bulb at the end of it.

Roger heard a most tremendous report, and something seemed to snap in his head.

He turned round sharply to see if Wychelly Sahib had fired off a revolver behind him; but no, Wy-

chelly Sahib was sitting quite still in his chair, where he had sat ever since they came in together.

"That *was* a nawful bang!" said Roger.

Mr. Spence said nothing, but he went forward to the window and pulled at the cords passing over pulleys at the top; down slid the heavy double window about two feet. Roger felt the cold air on his face, and the room seemed suddenly full of the most extraordinary noise—a humming, roaring, rumbling noise that was one sound yet compounded of many. He put his hand to his ears. "Oh, you have made such a noise in my head," he cried; "worse than any I've ever had since that measle."

"It isn't in your head, little man," said Mr. Spence, and he looked pleased: "it's in London. The noise that you hear is London. I hear it, your friend here hears it, but when I shut the window . . . How's the noise in your head now?"

Roger's cheeks got very red. "It's gone," he cried in great excitement, jumping off the high chair. "It was a real noise, not one of those pittence noises that nobody but me could hear."

Again Mr. Spence pulled at the cords, again that mysterious, distant roar floated into the room. As he closed the window again, Roger said in a solemn tone, "I do believe you've undeafed me."

"I do believe I have," said Mr. Spence, and laughed and rubbed his hands.

Roger spread out his hands, palms outwards, and made a low bow to Mr. Spence. "Salaam, sahib," he said, "you must be a magician."

"I haven't done with you yet, young man," said Mr. Spence, and Roger climbed back into the chair again.

All sorts of strange things did Mr. Spence do, such

as measuring the distance at which Roger could hear a watch tick, or striking on a strange-looking iron thing close to his head which made a little note that kept singing and singing for ever so long. And all these experiments seemed quite satisfactory to Mr. Spence. Then Roger was taken back to the waiting-room to look at illustrated papers while Wychelly Sahib, who seemed to have taken cold during the journey, conferred for a few minutes with Mr. Spence. When Wychelly Sahib returned to the waiting-room, he took an unfinished letter out of his pocket and wrote more on it at one of the desks where there were pens and ink and paper, and Roger listened to the ticking of a big clock on the mantelpiece. It was quite a long time since he had heard a clock tick, and he enjoyed the sound immensely.

By this time there were several people in the waiting-room. When Wychelly Sahib had finished his letter and fastened it up and they prepared to go forth from the magician's house to get lunch, Roger stopped at the door and looked back into the room. "I'd like to tell you," he said very loudly and distinctly, "he is a very clever conjuror. I hope he will undeaf you all like he did me."

CHAPTER XV

A ROLAND FOR HER OLIVER

"Lascia fare a Dio ch'e Santo Vecchio."

WHEN Montagu and Roger got back to Cowper's Cottage that afternoon about half-past four, Cynthia was out, but she had left a message to say that she would be in shortly and that they were not to wait tea for her.

Cynthia's absence was intentional, a deliberate carrying out of her theory that "one should never make oneself cheap to a man." Having been kind and amiable to Montagu on Wednesday evening, she reflected that to continue this treatment on Friday would be to spoil him, and perhaps render him unduly puffed up, so she decided to be out when he should arrive with little Roger.

That her absence on this particular occasion was singularly ungracious, not to say unmotherly, never occurred to Cynthia. As to how such absence would strike Montagu never crossed her mind.

The unsympathetic are nearly always incapable of conceiving any point of view but their own, and the imagination which carries with it the power of seeing things with another's eyes is a quality entirely separate from, and superior to, the mental flexibility which sometimes masquerades under that name. Cynthia's mind abounded in the somewhat egotistical form of imagination which sees self as the central figure in

every possible and impossible situation. The cold, beautiful woman, with the nature whose frozen depths no man had yet fathomed, was still leading lady in her human comedy; the scenario was prepared, but the great third act was yet to play.

Cynthia thought to rivet Montagu's fetters more firmly by her absence that afternoon; whereas, in reality, it severed the last link in the frail chain of his rapidly diminishing regard for her.

When, on arrival, he was told that she was not at home, he felt as though he had gone to her with some precious offering in his hands and she had slapped his face.

For a moment he was seized by an overpowering temptation to go on to Bredon Manor and take Roger with him. There he knew that he would meet with sympathy and rejoicing at the result of his quest. But after the first wild impulse he felt that it would not do. For one thing, Roger was very tired; it had been a long day for the child—a full day, charged to the brim with emotions and excitements of many kinds, and he was but five years old.

Besides, Cynthia would never forgive him, and although conscious of a strong desire to quarrel violently with that lady, he knew that for the sake of Reeve and little Roger he must play the humbug for the rest of his leave, probably to the end of time.

He gave Roger his tea, and still Cynthia did not come. Montagu sat down in a big chair in front of the fire and took the little boy on his knee. The child leaned a tired, heavy little head against the sheltering shoulder and in five minutes was fast asleep.

A maid came in and removed the tea-things. Montagu held up a warning hand and she did her work quietly. Roger never stirred.

As Montagu sat on in the pretty fire-lit room with the child's warm body in his arms in all the pathetic helplessness of sleep, his anger changed to a great pity and tenderness, and gradually the warmth and the silence overcame him, till he, too, slept and dreamt of kind grey eyes.

In his waistcoat pocket, close against his heart, reposed an envelope containing the torn half of a dance programme with a name and address written on the back. That the writing on the programme was entirely different from that on the envelope had not agitated Montagu. People write differently at different times. Still the doctor, worthy man, would have been astonished had he seen with what passionate affection those few words in his excellent handwriting were in private treated by a young man not himself afflicted by deafness.

The Dresden clock on the mantelpiece struck half-past five. Neither Montagu nor Roger stirred, and it was with a start that Montagu awoke a few minutes later to hear Cynthia's voice saying: "I do believe they are both fast asleep."

She was standing close by his chair, and Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum was just behind her.

"He is utterly worn out," Montagu said in a very low voice, pointing to Roger and not attempting to move; "if you will show me where to carry him he might be undressed and put to bed without really waking him."

"Come," said Cynthia, and her voice was, for her, quite gentle.

Montagu rose stiffly to his feet and carried Roger across the drawing-room and up the staircase to the bedroom where his cot was placed near to the bed of Grimes. It was a good large room with a table in

the middle, and served as nursery and sewing-room for Grimes. She sat at the table, now, making a blouse for Cynthia.

"Will you undress Master Roger, Grimes?" said Cynthia. "Gegg is out; try not to wake him, as he is very tired."

Very gently Montagu laid the child down on Grimes's bed, and then he stooped and kissed the little pale face, and turned to follow Cynthia.

Grimes waited until the door was shut behind them, then rapidly and noiselessly she crossed the room, opened the door again, darted out on to the landing, and peered after them as they went downstairs.

"That's a man, that is," said Grimes to herself; "'is wife won't never need to wait upon 'im." And she dealt gently with Roger and undressed him and put him in his cot without waking him.

Cynthia, still clad in her furs, turned genially to Montagu when they reached the drawing-room, saying, "Now, you must sit down and tell me all about your day and what the doctor said, and everything. I've only just opened your wire, as I've been out all day, but you see I was right; all along I said it was nothing serious."

"I fear I mustn't sit down," Montagu answered wearily; "it is getting late and I have over three miles to walk. I sent the cab away when I found you were not in. I can give you Spence's verdict in a minute. This time he says Roger's deafness was due to the closing of the Eustachian tubes, but his throat is weak and he is delicate. 'Get him strong, keep him warm, and avoid colds like the plague,' those were Spence's very words," and Montagu held out his hand to Cynthia in farewell.

"My car is at the door and I'm going to Surrum.

Can't I run you over?" asked Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum, for the first time making a remark since he had entered the drawing-room.

He was rather surprised at the very evident relief with which Montagu accepted his offer. A three-mile tramp over muddy and unfamiliar country roads held no special attraction for a man who was dog-tired and heavy hearted. Had he but known it, his eagerness to accept the proffered lift annoyed Cynthia quite as much, though for a different reason, as her absence on his arrival had annoyed Montagu. She had looked forward to the amusement of seeing the two men trying to sit each other out. That they should hastily and amicably depart together had not entered into her calculations.

"Don't let me keep you if you are in a hurry," she said huffily. "I only hope Roger won't be any the worse for such a tiring day. I always had my doubts about taking him up to town in this weather."

"I don't think he has taken cold," Montagu said gravely. By chance he happened at that moment to look at Mr. Lowenbaum, who winked at him happily from behind Cynthia's back.

"I too am tired," said Cynthia, calmly seating herself in the chair Montagu had vacated a few minutes before; then over her shoulder, "Did you know Mrs. Lapington was in this neighbourhood, Mr. Wycherly? She is staying with the parson in Marlehouse, and came to lunch yesterday and talked Khafadia till I positively ached with boredom. She goes back to town to-morrow, thank goodness, for I don't think I could stand another dose of her."

"I didn't know she was here," Montagu returned, "and I'm sorry, for I'd like to have seen her. *I* have a great affection for Khafadia."

"Well, you can expatiate upon its charms to Mr. Lowenbaum on your way to Surrum, but pray spare me," and Cynthia, still with her back to her two guests, closed her eyes as though utterly worn out.

The two men bade her farewell and left her sitting in the deep chair in front of the fire. As they settled themselves in the comfortable *coupé* under the heavy fur rugs, Mr. Lowenbaum remarked facetiously: "The missus seems a bit shirty about something; what have you been up to, eh?"

Montagu, who had been trying to give him the benefit of the doubt as to the wink, felt a strong desire to throttle Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum in his own motor, but he forced himself to say pleasantly enough: "I fear I've been rather rude all round. I must apologise to you for not greeting you when you came in. I was fast asleep, to tell the truth, and then I was afraid to wake the little chap by talking."

"Oh, that's all right!" the other replied good-naturedly. "What beats me is why her ladyship couldn't take the kiddy up to town herself instead of leaving you to do it."

"It was inconvenient for Mrs. Réeve to go to town to-day, and I was going in any case."

"Oh, that's all me eye, you know. She spent the day with me," Mr. Lowenbaum replied, raising his voice a little. "I ran her over to Oxford and we lunched at 'The Mitre.' Know Oxford at all?"

Montagu confessed to knowing Oxford rather well, and from Oxford the conversation drifted to horses, and before he knew where he was he had accepted Mr. Lowenbaum's invitation to "run him over" to a sale of hunters in a neighbouring town on Monday. And they parted on quite friendly terms at the Vicarage door.

"Now what," said Mr. Lowenbaum to himself, as the motor whirred through the muddy lanes towards the Grange, "does that chap play the nursemaid for? When I first saw him I thought he was one of the fair Cynthia's tame cats, but I'm hanged if I believe the chap's in love with her after to-night. And if he's not in love with her, what on earth does he race about the country with that measly little kid of hers for? Wot's he playing at?" For the life of him Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum couldn't make out.

Montagu's reflections as he dressed for dinner at Surrum Vicarage were somewhat to the effect that if Cynthia Reeve was going to run about the country alone with that awful little bounder, the sooner the Commissioner of Khafadia came home to look after her the better.

And then he transferred a rather dirty envelope to the pocket of his dress waistcoat with the aspiration, "I hope they got my wire all right, she'd be so pleased. If that confounded woman hadn't been so late I might have called and told them all about it."

CHAPTER XVI

BREDON CHAPEL

"The clinkum-clank o' Sabbath bells
Noo to the hoastin' rookery swells,
Noo faintin' laigh in shady dells,
Sounds far and near."

R. L. S.

WHEN Montagu awoke next morning he found his tea and his letters on the little table beside his bed. One of the letters was from Margaret and one from Edmund. He opened Margaret's first and read:

"Your telegram was a great joy to us and it was very good of you to send it; Herrick is triumphant. Indeed, the aurist's verdict upon that dear child is a matter for much thankfulness. We hoped that perhaps you would find time to run in and give us more details on your way to Surrum last night, but I expect you had a great deal to talk over with Mrs. Reeve. How pleased she must be and how grateful to you!

"When next you are over at Bredon we hope you will come and see us (you have never seen your books yet, do you know?), and then we must arrange a time for you and your brother to come and stay with us. My husband and Herrick join me in kindest greetings and congratulations on the result of your expedition.

"Yours very sincerely,

"MARGARET WYCHERLY."

Then came Edmund's letter:

"TORTHORREL, CAIRNTULLEN, R.S.O.,
"INVERNESS-SHIRE.

"DEAR OLD MONTAGU,—All our nice plans have gone to pot, for to-day I get instructions from the Admiralty to join the *Calliope* on December 4th, at Portsmouth, and shall be on duty there till our next move. I may get a week-end or so, but that's all I shall get. Of course it's a lift in the service and I suppose I ought to be glad, but I did look forward to a month at Bredon with you, especially to stopping at Bredon Manor. I've written to Mrs. Wycherly to-day telling her what has happened, and perhaps she may ask us to go there at once instead of later, as you see I've got barely a fortnight now. I suppose you can get away from the Holts at any time, for you could go back there if you and they wish it after I've gone.

"Lucky beggar with such a long leave in front of you. I've had a ripping time here. You ought to have come. Good shooting, dances every night, pretty girls, and the cheeriest party possible. Our relatives are quite worth cultivating, though I will honestly confess that none of them quite come up to 'Cousin Herrick.' I shall wait here till Mrs. Wycherly makes a move. Then if she can't have me (you could go later, you know, if they're too full up for us both), I'll come down to Marlehouse to 'The Bull' and you'd better join me there. It's not much good looking for a farmhouse now I've got such a beastly short time. Have you met the Lowenbaums yet? Give my greetings to the fair Mirry, if you have. Dancing is a jolly sight cheaper than bridge, I find, and better

for one's soul and one's digestion, if it does play the dickens with one's young affections.

"Try and work Bredon Manor, there's a good chap.

"Your affectionate

"LITTLE BROTHER."

Montagu was sincerely sorry that Edmund's leave was thus curtailed, but in spite of himself his heart gave a great bound at the nearer prospect of a visit to Bredon Manor. To be under the same roof with Herrick; to see her all day and every day; to be admitted into the intimacy of that delightful home—how could he grieve greatly over any circumstance that brought all this nearer?

He knew that Margaret would have them if she possibly could, so that although he told Mrs. Holt at breakfast of Edmund's change of plans, he made no effort to go over to Bredon on that day, but devoted himself entirely to his kind hosts, driving into Marlehouse with Mr. Holt in the morning, and meekly attending upon Mrs. Holt during a round of calls in the afternoon. In the evening he played a lengthy game of chess with Mr. Holt, and afterwards permitted that instructive gentleman to enlighten him as to the best way of managing a district in India. According to Mr. Holt, the great fault of the average civilian was lack of initiative, and he conjured Montagu not to allow himself to march comfortably along any beaten track, but to strike out a path for himself. Montagu was a good listener (a quality which in youth is worth any amount of fluency or even of actual knowledge), and when the clock on the study chimney-piece struck twelve, Mr. Holt bade him good-night, serene in the conviction that young Wycherly had fulfilled his early promise. And he woke up Mrs. Holt,

who had retired two hours before, to tell her that Montagu Wycherly was certainly one of the most satisfactory boys that had ever passed through his moulding hands. Mrs. Holt smiled sleepily and murmured something acquiescent. To herself she said, "I'll make it up to him to-morrow, poor dear boy."

Montagu duly attended Surrum Church on Sunday morning, and, arrayed in a surplice, sat in the choir and read the lessons. To his relief none of the party from Surrum Grange was present. He had dreaded unspeakably Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum's delighted wink of recognition when he should discover the identity of the lesson-reader.

At lunch, Mrs. Holt said, "It's a most beautiful day and the roads are far better than they were yesterday; you'd better take my husband's bicycle and ride over to Bredon Chapel to afternoon service. The chapel is quite unique, you know, and the service wonderfully well done. Lord Delafosse's chaplain, Mr. Ellenhill, is very musical and takes enormous pains with the choir. They've got an organ and an organist, and one never knows what musician the old lord may get down from town. Then I think you'd better go on and call at the Manor House. I think they're always in on Sunday. There's no evening service at Bredon and you needn't hurry back to ours, as twice to church is enough—don't you think so, Haviland?"

"Well, I don't quite know. You see I thought Wycherly might read the lessons again to-night."

"Nonsense, Haviland! He has done quite enough for to-day, and you're not going to make him go to church three times—he'd better seize this lovely day to go to Bredon; it will be dark directly after lunch in a week or so. Don't you think you'd better go

to-day?" She turned to Montagu smiling, shook her head and frowned at her husband, and Montagu very gratefully fell in with her arrangement.

As church was his ultimate goal Mr. Holt felt no compunction in lending his guest his bicycle. The saddle was put up, and Montagu set forth breathing blessings upon kindly Mrs. Holt, who stood in the doorway beaming upon him while he mounted and rode down the drive. Who can wonder that her old boys loved her?

November was really a wonderful month that year, and Montagu's first Sunday in the Cotswold Hills was the most wonderful day in all that month. Blue sky and warm sunshine overhead: underfoot, some mud, it is true, but on the whole the roads were very fair. The three miles between Surrum and Bredon Delafosse passed through typical Cotswold lanes, grass-bordered, with tall, straggling hedges still clothed in the scarlet and gold of luxuriant brambles and the fluffy whiteness of "old man's beard." The distant clanging of a musical old bell (Lord Delafosse had spent a small fortune upon that bell) was the only sound that broke the Sabbath stillness, but as Montagu rode through the great gates, hospitably open on Sundays, he passed little groups of villagers on their way to afternoon service.

Would she be there?

He was early, and had plenty of time to wonder and admire before service. He was the only occupant of a seat in the centre aisle, and directly behind one that bore a coat of arms carved on the central panel. Just as the bell ceased, the old lord hobbled into church and sat down facing the carved panel. He had refused to occupy the front seat in the church because he said he couldn't get out without making

a clatter, and sometimes his nephew's sermons "were more than flesh could endure."

The chapel was beautiful, ornate, well proportioned, harmonious in every detail. A small surpliced choir, followed by a youthful and extremely good-looking clergyman, was played in to the strains of "Walmisley in D," and service began.

She had not come.

Montagu was disappointed. He even felt a trifle censorious. She *ought* to have come. He had felt so sure she would. People living in country places ought to set an example, and Montagu, not having attended a religious service of any kind for several years, felt a thrill of virtuous self-satisfaction at finding himself in church for the second time in one day.

Assuredly Herrick ought to have come.

Lord Delafosse fixed his gold-rimmed eyeglasses firmly upon his nose and deliberately turned round to inspect the stranger behind him, at the same time presenting him with a large hymn-book. Apparently his lordship was satisfied with Montagu's general bearing, for he muttered something that sounded like "grumph," and betook himself once more to the study of his Prayer-Book.

Mr. Ellenhill had undoubtedly a most beautiful voice, the small choir sang and did not bellow after the usual fashion of country choirs, and Montagu, really admirative of the service, continued to wonder how Herrick could have found it in her heart to keep away from such a delightful church.

The sunlight faded, the chapel grew grey and dim. In the middle of the second hymn, he noticed that Lord Delafosse suddenly laid down his book and grasped the desk in front of him with both hands.

Montagu leaned over and saw that the old lord's face was ashy white and that he swayed as he stood. Long watching of his guardian had taught Montagu to know a heart attack when he saw it; in a moment he had half dragged, half carried Lord Delafosse from his seat to the door, so quietly that, in the gathering gloom, it only looked as if they were both bent on getting out before the sermon.

Once in the porch, he laid the old lord full length on the stone seat, and proceeded to rifle his pockets. As he expected, he found the flask he sought, and then poured brandy down his lordship's throat. The grey shadow passed from the old man's face and slowly he drew himself into a sitting posture.

"You are expeditious, sir," he said, smiling under his heavy eyebrows at Montagu's anxious face.

"I hope that you will pardon the liberty I took," Montagu said gently, "but I have had some small experience in these things, and I know that to sit down is dangerous. You are better? The spasm has passed?"

"If you will put me under the further obligation of giving me your arm as far as my house—it's not a quarter of a mile through the woods—I could get home at once."

Leaning heavily on Montagu's arm, Lord Delafosse passed slowly through the grounds of the little church into the shadowy woodland path.

"Whenever," said his lordship, "I allow myself to consider other people, I invariably repent it. Now to-day I gave my man a holiday, because he asked me, for no other reason; the lazy varlet has an easy time of it. And because it was fine I did not trouble the coachman to put in the horses. Consequently I walked by myself and walked rather too fast, with

the result that I make an exhibition of pitiful senility to villagers I would fain impress with my vigour, and entail considerable bodily exertion upon a total stranger. Tell me, sir, who taught you to deal so deftly and gently with aged persons?"

"Ah, sir, there you touch me nearly—all I am and have and hope to be is due to two delightful old people who took care of my brother and me when we were children."

The old lord stopped short, and peered through the gloom into Montagu's face. "Then I make a shrewd guess that you are that Montagu Wycherly of whom my beautiful young friend, Miss Wycherly, was talking yesterday. I am pleased to meet you, sir, though for your sake I wish it could have been in pleasanter fashion. One good turn I've done you—you've missed Anthony's sermon. He can utter more inanities in that agreeable voice of his in ten minutes than the average sane man would consider possible. Still, he is always brief, and he intones the service beautifully, and he's my nephew, so what more could one expect?"

Lord Delafosse paused. Montagu ventured upon some praise of the church.

"Ah, it rather eclipses Surrum, with its whitewash and that wheezy harmonium; why, people come for miles just to hear my choir-boys sing. Anthony bullies and I bribe, and between us we get some music. It will be better in a year's time, but even now it's passable."

By this time they had reached the central drive, and Bredon Delafosse, its many windows blazing with the reflected rays of the setting sun, bulked large and imposing on their view.

As they reached the broad flight of steps leading

to the front door, the old lord stopped: "Be kind enough to ring for my men," he said. "I won't mount those steps to-night after the warning I've had. They can carry me up; I've got a chair for the purpose."

When this had been done and Lord Delafosse was standing in his own hall, whither Montagu had followed him, the old gentleman once more fixed his gold-rimmed eyeglasses on his nose and looked keenly at the stranger: "I won't ask you to stay now," he said; "I'm tired and we should bore one another. You had better go on to the Manor House and they'll give you tea. I fancy they expect you to-day. I'm vastly obliged to you, and I hope we shall get to know one another better. If you want a mount for Tuesday —the hounds meet here—pray allow me to offer you one; it would be a great pleasure to me if you would accept it. I knew your guardian at Oxford in the early fifties; he was my senior by some years, but I knew him. He was the youngest Fellow at New College in those days, a great scholar. Good-bye to you, sir, good-bye."

Montagu made a bee-line for the Manor House, and absolutely forgot Mr. Holt's bicycle, which was left leaning against the wall outside Bredon Chapel.

Lord Delafosse lay down on the sofa in the library while his butler, the "quite grandly dressed man" of Herrick's first acquaintance, ministered to his wants and worried him with respectfully anxious inquiries. When at last the man had gone Lord Delafosse lay gazing at the great fire of logs and muttering to himself: "So that is the young man. I took a violent dislike to him the moment I heard his name; a pedantic conceited name, but upon my soul he is neither the one nor the other. I don't know that I ought to be

particularly grateful to him for probably prolonging my existence, but he did it delicately and without fuss. His manner is good. Confound the fellow! I'd much rather have been able to hate him. I wonder if he can play picquet?"

Montagu's bee-line was not a success. He lost himself in Bredon Woods, and it was after five o'clock by the time he entered the Manor hall, bright with firelight and the mellow radiance of tall lamps.

It seemed full of people: visitors from Fareham, Mr. Ellenhill, Cynthia Reeve in gorgeous sables and a wonderful mauve frock, and little Roger seated on Herrick's knee behind the tea-table. Tea was practically over, but Margaret welcomed Montagu in her own quietly cordial fashion, and Herrick ordered a fresh brew of tea for him.

"We expected you sooner, didn't we, Roger?" Herrick remarked as he found a seat beside her in the corner by the fire. "Why did you rush out of church with Lord Delafosse—was he unwell? Mr. Ellenhill is anxious: you might tell him; he doesn't like to go to ask, as Lord Delafosse does so hate inquiries about his health. Do you know Mr. Ellenhill? No! This is our cousin, Mr. Montagu Wychelly. Now explain!"

Montagu explained, making light of the old lord's illness, as he knew that autocratic nobleman would have wished.

Roger—oh, unappreciative Roger!—climbed down off Herrick's knee that he might scramble up on that of Wychelly Sahib, and Mr. Ellenhill drew up his chair and begged for yet another cup of tea.

Greedy fellow! Montagu wished him at Jericho. With his dark, handsome face and splendid physique, he was quite abominably good-looking, well-bred, and

agreeable; and it was manifest that he ardently admired Herrick.

Sheltered by Roger, Montagu leaned towards her, murmuring reproachfully: "Why didn't you come to church?"

"I meant to bring Roger, but we played horses in the garden till it was too late, so then I made Mrs. Reeve come for a walk and brought them back to tea with us."

"I can hear all that you're saying," Roger announced. "I can hear now even if you whisper."

Herrick laid her cheek down on Roger's head and smiled radiantly up at Montagu, her eyes bright and tender in the firelight: "That's your doing, Wychelly Sahib," she said softly; "I've never thanked you yet, but I'm more than grateful."

"It was your doing really," Montagu began; "you thought of . . ."

"*I* don't think it was neither of you," Roger interrupted decidedly; "it was that Magician Sahib, really."

Roger had raised his voice in his eagerness, and Cynthia, who was sitting on the other side of the room, looked curiously at the little group round the tea-table. She drew on her long gloves, fastened her furs, picked up her enormous muff and rose from her seat. "We must really be going," she said to William Wycherly, who had been very well content to devote himself to her for the last hour; "it will be late and cold for Roger if we stay any longer."

Her going broke up the party. The Marlehouse visitors went with her, so that there was no necessity for either of the young men to offer his escort. The unconscionable Mr. Ellenhill demanded yet another cup of tea—he was a regular Dr. Johnson—and Mar-

garet beckoned Montagu to come and sit beside her on the settle.

"We telegraphed to 'little Edmund,'" she said, smiling, "and he comes on Wednesday night. Can you, too, come then? It will be so pleasant, for my mother comes to-morrow, and she will be ever so pleased to see you both again."

CHAPTER XVII

A FRIEND IN NEED

"Wouldst thou both eat thy cake and have it?"
HEYWOOD.

WHEN Cynthia and Roger arrived at the Cottage she called him to her in the drawing-room, instead of sending him upstairs to Grimes or Gegg as usual.

"What were you and Miss Wycherly talking about over in that corner when you shouted so?" she asked curiously.

She had seated herself in her favourite deep chair, and held a Japanese fan to shade her face from the fire, which drew answering flames in red and green and deepest blue from the stones in her many rings.

The little boy stood at her knee and gazed at her admiringly. She had been very kind and merry that afternoon, and Roger felt less timid than usual. For a minute he knitted his brows in a vain effort to recollect, then smiled all over his face, exclaiming: "Oh, I remember; she said it was *him* did it, and he said it was *her* did it, and I told them it was neither of them and they both laughed."

"Did what?" Cynthia demanded impatiently; "what do you mean? Did what?"

Again Roger knitted his brows, looking puzzled. Cynthia gave him a little shake to hurry him.

"It was something about that doctor."

"What doctor? Mr. Spence, do you mean?"

"Yes, it was him; I said he'd undeafed me, not Wychelly Sahib or Hayick, but they seemed to think each other done it."

"What had Miss Wycherly to do with it at all? She never heard of Mr. Spence till I told her this afternoon."

Roger was unconvinced. "I think she did," he insisted; "she wanted me to go very much; she was awfully pleased when I was undeafed. I saw her yesterday in the road when you were out, and she kissed me and hugged me for joy—she said she did."

"That will do, Roger," Cynthia said coldly; "I never permit argument; you may go upstairs."

Roger stood where he was. "Are you cross 'cause Hayick knew?" he asked, looking hard at his mother.

"I told you to go upstairs," Cynthia repeated.

Roger trotted obediently across the room; at the door he paused: "She was awfully glad," he said again, "gladder van you," and he shut the door behind him.

Cynthia was intensely irritated. Roger's innocent revelations suggested an explanation of Montagu's conduct that had never so much as crossed her mind, and was intensely repugnant. Was it possible that he had fallen in love with Herrick Wycherly? Certainly he had seemed to sit in her pocket that afternoon, and had not made the smallest effort to accompany Cynthia when she left the Manor, as she had certainly expected him to do.

"Was it that girl who had suggested to Montagu he should take Roger to London?"

A furious wave of anger surged over Cynthia. How dared she? How dared he? They had arranged it between them, and she, Cynthia Reeve, the dignified and inscrutable, had meekly played into their

hands. That little Roger had benefited did not soften her in the least. He was her child. Herrick Wycherly had no possible right to interfere in any way. Cynthia rose from her seat and put her hand upon the bell. Then she waited: she did not ring.

Her first impulse had been to summon Grimes and tell her that if Miss Wycherly called for Master Roger he was on no account to be allowed to go out with her ever again.

But Cynthia's was not the nature to act upon impulse. Three weeks before she had given a precisely opposite order. In her pleasure at having been called upon by the Wycherlys, she had told the servants that if Miss Wycherly came to see Roger, or wanted to take him with her, he was to be allowed to go. Herrick had evidently taken a great fancy to the child; if she liked to look after him—Cynthia did Herrick the justice to believe that the little boy would be absolutely safe and happy in her hands—well, it saved somebody else that trouble. They were good people—in the social, not the ethical sense: that did not concern Cynthia—they had a nice place. Intimacy with them would be distinctly advantageous, and they were her nearest neighbours.

Cynthia's hand dropped from the bell. No! that would not do. Open war would be unwise.

But Montagu . . .

Cynthia had been so certain of his devotion. He was hers to take or leave. Her servant always, although there had not passed between them any word that all the world might not hear.

Yet Herrick Wycherly was undoubtedly an attractive girl. Cynthia was too good looking herself to be grudging in her admission of another woman's claims to beauty. Wherever Mrs. Reeve went, people

spoke in amusedly admiring terms of Herrick's many charms, of the number of her adorers, of how she could twist that old curmudgeon, Lord Delafosse, round her little finger and make him do any mortal thing she asked him. Herrick had taken little Roger to Bredon-Delafosse to see the wonderful collection of stuffed birds there, and next day the Earl, accompanied by a visiting niece, called upon Cynthia.

Mrs. Reeve felt that the call was not altogether a success, although she knew she was looking her best. The fact was that Lord Delafosse had reached an age when mere beauty in a woman was not enough to satisfy him. He required to be interested. He demanded wit, and wit is even rarer than beauty.

He was impatient, and woe betide the person who failed to understand his allusions. Explanation bored him to extinction, and far more than her fair face did he value Herrick's unexpectedness: the quick understanding, the eager spirit that, often as not, leapt to do battle with his own.

"What do you think of her, Uncle Charles?" asked plain Miss Ellenhill, who knew very well what he thought.

"She's handsome—very, and knows how to dress, but she's ignorant and underbred," was his verdict, "and the husband's a fool to let her come home alone."

Nevertheless, Cynthia valued the Delafosse visiting cards, and they generally came out on top in the card basket.

And now as she sat before the fire, her anger against Herrick died down a little. The girl had been friendly enough, and after all Montagu was some sort of relation. He was bound to be civil to the Manor House people. When he saw how much Mr. Lowenbaum admired her he would be jealous. Cynthia was sure

he would be jealous. Her belief in her own power had been a little shaken, but it was far too firmly established to be shattered. And Cynthia had other worries. For five nights out of seven she had played bridge at the Lowenbaums. They sent a motor for her before dinner, and sent her back in it about two in the morning, and she had had a bad week. Ill luck had pursued her, and they played for such big stakes.

Cynthia had a way of saying "Bridge is the only thing I live for; when I am playing I can *forget*," as though she had untold sorrows that she would fain drown in some delirious excitement. The statement impressed no one but herself, for people with even well-hidden griefs are not wont to look as robustly healthy as Cynthia. But she enjoyed making the remark, and never failed to sigh after making it. She sighed now, but it was over her card losses that she sighed. She had spent a great deal of money since she came home, and although the Commissioner made her a very liberal allowance, it did not nearly cover her expenses, and Cynthia was in debt. She was not extravagant except in the matter of clothes. In household matters she was even stingy, and since she came to Bredon she had been out so much that she had run Cowper's Cottage on remarkably little; but compared with Indian housekeeping the books seemed very big. She had overdrawn her banking account, and she owed a good deal more than her husband's next draft would cover.

To be sure she might write and ask her grandfather for some money, and he would probably give it to her, for he was liberal and open-handed, but he was also inquisitive and very active, and he might propose to come over and see her to "look into her affairs," and

that was not to be thought of. Cynthia positively shuddered at the idea of her grandfather coming to Bredon, and yet he was quite as presentable as Mr. Benjamin Lowenbaum: she acknowledged this. No, that would never do; she must sell one of her rings. It was a nuisance, for she loved her rings, but it was the simplest way out of the difficulty. She held out her pretty hand in the firelight, and tried to decide which she could bring herself to part with.

The door bell rang.

There were steps in the hall, and the parlour-maid announced Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum.

"You look jolly snug in here," that gentleman remarked, drawing his chair up to the fire. "I ran over in the little car, and there's a beastly wind blowing. I really came to see you about Tuesday. Do you know what that old beast has done?"

"What old beast?" asked Cynthia, who knew perfectly well.

"Why, old Delafosse; he has given strict orders that no vehicle is to pass his lodge gates unless it's drawn by some animal with four legs. Do you know what he said? 'A coster's cart, a Greek chariot drawn by zebras, or even an elephant with a howdah is welcome, but not one motor-car shall come to a meet in my grounds,' and he's givin' the hunt breakfast, you know."

"Well, but you are going to ride, and so is Miriam; what difference does it make to you?"

"It makes a good deal of difference to the old people. They want to go, naturally. It's the biggest meet of the season: the whole county turns out, and they were goin' to take you. Now they must either stop away or walk up the drive and stand in with the mob. We've got no horse vehicle down here except

the luggage cart, and we've no carriage horses even if we had the carriage. The pater sold three carriages this autumn. He said five motors was enough for one family, and at the time I agreed with him."

"You mustn't mind about me," Cynthia said a little cruelly. "Only this afternoon at the Manor House Mr. Wycherly explained to me the prejudice Lord Delafosse has against motors, and Mrs. Wycherly offered to take Roger and me if I didn't drive myself."

The Lowenbaums had been extremely hospitable to Cynthia, and it was not very nice of her to be so unconcerned at their possible exclusion from the meet at Bredon Delafosse. Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum's narrow eyes narrowed still further, and his expression was almost aggressively genial as he exclaimed: "Oh, that's all right then—I forgot you were such pals of the Wycherlys; by the way, you can do me a good turn there. Next time you get a chance introduce me to Miss Wycherly, will you? I've met her on several occasions, but somehow always just missed being introduced."

Cynthia flushed a very little and lifted her eyes to Mr. Lowenbaum's face for one second. "Of course, I shall be delighted," she said, and contrary to his expectation her voice sounded absolutely sincere.

"I say, though, aren't you goin' to hunt this winter?"

"No, Mr. Lowenbaum, I am not. I'm far too hard up. It's a most dreadful disappointment to me, but there's no chance of it. It's horrid to be poor—but there it is."

Cynthia spoke as if her inability to hunt was a most dreadful deprivation, whereas in truth she detested riding: it disarranged her hair. Her husband had tried to teach her when she first went out to India, and

every horse she rode got a sore back; but she had no natural aptitude, was nervous, and had no patience. She knew she had a bad seat, and Mrs. Reeve carefully avoided any position in which she was unlikely to look her best.

"I say, though, that's hard lines," Mr. Lowenbaum remarked sympathetically. "We could mount you, you know, on Tuesday, if you'd like it."

"It's most awfully kind of you, but I think not. If I can't hunt regularly all the winter, I'd rather not hunt at all. I can always drive to the meets, you know."

Mr. Lowenbaum rose: "Well, I'll tell the mater she needn't worry about Tuesday, and I'll look out for you at Bredon Delafosse. You'll work it about Miss Wycherly, won't you? And I say, Mrs. Reeve" —Mr. Lowenbaum hesitated a moment—"if you're short of money . . . do let me be your banker . . . the richest of us gets into a tight place sometimes, and I feel a bit guilty, you know—you've played a lot of bridge and you always pay up like a man—upon my word you do—like a man, and it's more than most of 'em do."

He stood on the hearthrug looking down at Cynthia, who looked at the fire and said nothing.

"Don't be offended, Mrs. Reeve," he continued, "it's perfectly common and simple: you just tell me how much you want and you shall have it. And you can pay me when and where and how you like. I thought you were lookin' a bit worried yesterday. Don't worry."

Cynthia looked up at him, not angrily, not gratefully, but with the cool appraising glance of one who weighs a possibility. "Do you know," she said, dropping her eyes as she spoke, "that when you came in I

was wondering what on earth I was to do? It *is* the bridge, partly: but that, of course, is only passing ill luck. I was actually wondering what I could sell."

She held out her pretty hand in front of her as though still meditating which of her rings to put upon the market.

Mr. Lowenbaum stooped and caught the pretty hand in both of his: "Nonsense!" he exclaimed; "that's all tommy rot—you couldn't spare one of 'em."

Very gently Cynthia disengaged her hand, rose to her feet, and stood beside Mr. Lowenbaum in front of the fire. She was the taller of the two: his eyes were just on a level with her fair firm chin.

"You'll let me do this for you, won't you?" he asked, speaking low and hurriedly. "I'm awfully flush of cash just now, and you know you can do us a lot of good in the county if you like. Why shouldn't we behave friendly to one another? Why shouldn't we?"

Why, indeed?

PART IV.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONFIDENCES

"What if we still ride on, we too,
With life forever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity?"
The Last Ride Together.

THE hounds met on the lawn at Bredon Delafosse on the third Tuesday in November. Its owner filled his house with sportsmen for the occasion and kept open house for all comers, provided they came on two legs, or on, or behind four.

The great lawn was given up to the hounds and actual followers, but the terrace in front of the house was crowded with every conceivable kind of vehicle unpropelled by steam or electricity, and a concourse of pedestrians surrounded the field on all sides. It is true that the Greek chariot and the howdah were lacking, but there were archaic conveyances in plenty, for the whole countryside turned out.

Lord Delafosse himself stood on the steps with a hearty greeting for all comers; it was the one day in the year when he laid himself out to be agreeable. Time was when for one meteoric season he had mastered the hounds himself, and had been known

throughout the county as a daring and brilliant sportsman. Now he was content, or pretended he was content, to subscribe liberally to the hunt. In the hall was abundance of good cheer for all comers, and his lordship's servants took care that none that day should set forth from Bredon Delafosse unfortified.

The old lord had driven over to Surrum in person on the previous day. He did not see Montagu, who had gone to Tetford with Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum, but had made himself most charming to Mrs. Holt, and arranged with her to send a mount over for her guest in good time the following morning. The result was that William Wycherly, his daughter, and Montagu, splendidly mounted by Lord Delafosse, were standing together in a little group, when the doctor, in a sober black coat with beautiful breeches and boots, astride an extremely fidgety bay mare, spied Herrick.

"Well, Miss Herrick," he bellowed; "how's your deaf friend?"

Then he caught sight of Montagu and turned a deeper purple than usual.

Herrick glanced mischievously from Montagu to the doctor, and threaded her way to where that gentleman's mare had cleared a little circle around her by her antics.

"He's cured," she cried gaily, "absolutely cured. He's no more deaf than you are now; that Mr. Spence is much cleverer than you made out."

"Is he here?" the doctor ejaculated huskily; "is the chap here to-day?"

Herrick's eyes danced and her dimples peeped out roguishly as she held up a warning finger, whispering: "Yes, he is, but I shan't introduce him to you

because you were so depressing about him;" and she turned her horse to ride back to her father.

"There is no need," the doctor shouted after her. "*I'm* not deaf or blind."

Mrs. Wycherly in her neat little dogcart was driving Mrs. Reeve, and Roger sat behind with the friendly little groom in a state of excitement bordering on ecstasy.

The hounds began to whimper. The huntsman decided to draw Bredon Woods, and gradually the whole field moved off.

No good day is in the least like another good day: yet on paper there is a certain sameness in descriptions of this sport for kings. That day the hounds started an old dog fox in Bredon Woods and he gave the field a long run and a hard run, and they never killed at all, but all the same it was a glorious day.

Montagu, Herrick, and her father kept pretty well together until William Wycherly's horse managed to pick up a stone crossing a lane, and by the time he had removed it he found that he had lost his daughter, who waited for nothing when she was out hunting, and his guest. This did not distress him much, but by and by he discovered that he had also lost the rest of the field, and that was annoying.

Montagu took care not to lose Herrick, and they found themselves alone, walking their horses home along the muddy lanes some nine miles from Bredon, about three o'clock that afternoon.

Both they and the horses were tired, for they had had a strenuous day, and after much cheerful chatter upon all sorts of subjects they had fallen silent and there was no sound save the soft plop of the horses' hoofs upon the yielding road.

Montagu asked nothing better than that he might

look at Herrick, admire the spread of her strong young shoulders, the subtle curve of her slender, flexible waist.

It is a well known fact that a plain woman looks almost beautiful on horseback if she can ride; therefore a beautiful woman who rides well is a splendid and delightful spectacle, and in a county famous for its fearless sportswomen Herrick could hold her own.

"Don't you think Sancho is a beauty?" Herrick asked presently, patting her favourite's glossy neck; "Lord Delafosse gave him to me on my birthday this year—but I've paid for him in a way, though he is a present."

"Paid for him?" Montagu repeated; "what do you mean?"

"Not one single game of hockey am I to have this year. He made me promise before he would give me Sancho, and I wanted him so much I let the hockey go, though it's a pity, for I play quite decently; I should have played for the county if I'd kept on, and they all think it rather mean of me."

"But why should he mind your playing hockey?"

"Oh, it's too silly, the whole thing, and dad is just as bad. Last March, playing in a match I got a black eye—rather a bad black eye. Somebody fouled, or I was too close or something; anyway, I got a most tremendous whack, and my eye swelled up, and it cut my eyebrow just the least little bit—just here. Well, I had to stop, for I couldn't see, and dad had come to watch the match—we had driven over, it was only at Marlehouse—and he took me straight to the doctor there and then. But, oh, the fuss! You'd have thought no one in the world had ever had a black eye before, and we had the ill-luck to meet Lord Delafosse on the way home, and I was all bandaged up. He

stopped his carriage and we had to stop, so there was another fuss. That evening, just after tea, he called, and he harangued dad and mother for half an hour; I was lying down, for I'd got rather a bad headache. Next day he came again and insisted on seeing me, and he said it was a girl's chief business in life to be as agreeable to the eye as God had made her; that I had wilfully rendered myself a repulsive object, and that if I had been *his* daughter he would be inclined to beat me, and that hockey was unfeminine, and the girls who played it were dishevelled mænads: and a whole lot more in the same strain. Then the poor old dear tried persuasion, and finally, bribery and corruption, and . . . Sancho is the result."

"Lord Delafosse was perfectly right. I am more grateful to him than ever," Montagu said decidedly. He had never taken his eyes off the pretty, mobile face during this long recital.

"*He* was right enough, I dare say; but I'm not at all sure that I was. Only you see, I knew he would give me Sancho whether or no, and it seemed mean to do nothing in return. All the same I feel I've behaved shabbily to the club; I was the best left wing they had."

"Bother the club! What does *it* matter?"

"But it does matter; one ought to be decent to everybody all round; and not think only of one's self and one's looks—and one's chances of hunting." Herrick looked quite serious, and Montagu, who still shuddered at the thought of the black eye, said nothing.

"Cousin Montagu, you know Mrs. Lapington, don't you? Her husband is something at Khafadia, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's in the P.W.D., a very decent chap, and

she's a kind soul too. Did you meet her when she was down here last week?"

"Yes, I did. At the Vicarage at tea, and I don't think she's at all a kind soul. She said all sorts of horrid things about Mrs. Reeve, and she'd been to lunch with her that very day."

"Perhaps she does say rather nasty things sometimes, but she's quite kind-hearted really. What did she say about Mrs. Reeve?"

Herrick looked straight between her horses' ears and answered by another question: "You have a good deal of influence over Mrs. Reeve, Cousin Montagu, haven't you?"

"I! not a whit. Why on earth should you think that?"

"Well, you persuaded her to let little Roger see the aurist, anyhow."

"She didn't require any persuasion; she was perfectly willing he should go."

Herrick looked straight between her horse's ears her face grew grave and she said slowly: "Do you think you could persuade her to get a governess for Roger at once?—a lady who would be a companion for her too?"

"I suppose Mrs. Lapington said she ought to have somebody—she's quite right."

"She *did* say so, and a great deal more that was both unnecessary and unkind—but it *would* be a good thing. Mother hates me to talk about other people's concerns, but you are such a great friend of Mrs. Reeve's. . . ."

"*Am* I?" Montagu's voice implied that it was possible Herrick exaggerated the warmth of his friendship for Mrs. Reeve, but she took no notice and went on: "Roger is not properly looked after; he is

left so much to servants, and I don't think they're a very nice kind of servant, and it seems nobody's business to see to him. . . . When Mrs. Reeve first came she said she was looking for a governess; it seems such a pity she can't find one. Couldn't you help her?"

"Look for a governess? Honestly, I don't think I could. I don't think she would allow me to interfere in any way, even if I wanted to. Seriously, Herrick, you must see I couldn't do such a thing now, could I?"

"You are wilfully misunderstanding me. What I want you to do is to suggest to her that she ought to have some one to look after Roger. Really, it's quite as much for her own sake. . . ."

"I'd have more chance if I put it on that ground," Montagu murmured.

"Now *you* are being unkind and censorious, just like that horrid Mrs. Lapington."

"Look here, Herrick, let's be frank with each other," Montagu said, suddenly riding very close to her. "Mrs. Reeve is rather making a mess of things down here, and we all want to stop it if possible, but the only person that I can think of who has the slightest chance of influencing her is your mother. She could suggest what neither you nor I can. The question is, *would* she?"

Herrick shook her head slowly from side to side. "Mother is the most uninterfering woman in the world. She always says that the only society she will ever belong to is Queen Alexandra's 'Society for Minding One's Own Business'—if it ever gets started."

"But surely to help somebody else . . . a little child. . . ."

"Montagu, do you like Mrs. Reeve?"

"Herrick, do *you* like Mrs. Reeve?"

"Sometimes yes; sometimes I hate her; but I shall never, never quarrel with her, because I love Roger—and I think he loves me."

By this time they had turned out of the lane into the highroad leading to Bredon. The horses realised that they were nearly home and began to trot. As they neared the Manor House gate Herrick leaned towards Montagu: "You will *try*, won't you?" she pleaded.

"I will try if you wish it, but I shall fail, and my failure will make things worse than if I did nothing; surely you know by this time I will do anything you ask me."

"But I haven't *asked* you to do this," Herrick exclaimed nervously. "I am often hasty and unwise . . . please don't do anything because I asked you. I only suggested a possibility. You are coming to us to-morrow: perhaps if we tackle mother together; but I thought that you, being such an intimate friend . . ."

"Do you know, I'm just a little bit tired of being told that I am such a very great friend of Mrs. Reeve. Who is responsible for the idea? I'm sure *she* is not, and I'm equally certain that I have never ventured to boast of anything of the kind."

Herrick did not answer. She had not forgotten that Mrs. Lapington, who hotly resented Cynthia's cool reception of her, had not hesitated to say before a roomful of people that "it was to be hoped that young Wycherly, who was always running after his Commissioner's wife in Khafadia, would find something better to do now that he had come home." And only on the Sunday before, during her walk with Mrs. Reeve, that lady had been at some pains to impress the

same idea upon Herrick by speaking of Montagu as that "dear, devoted boy."

Montagu had been intensely annoyed by certain jocular allusions in the same strain made by Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum on the previous day, and he waited rather anxiously for Herrick's next remark, which did not come.

"I have the greatest admiration for Reeve," he said, as Herrick remained silent; "he's a splendid chap. One of the keenest men in the service, and as devoted and unselfish as he is straight and competent."

"Cousin Montagu, suppose it was your wife and *your* little boy, and Mr. Reeve was in England and you were in India, what would you like him to do?"

They had reached the Manor House drive gate and it was nearly dark, so that Herrick could not see how Montagu flushed to the roots of his hair at her question—a question which struck home in a totally unintended fashion. What *would* Reeve like him to do? For the life of him he couldn't tell, unless it was to keep out of Cynthia's way as much as possible. Herrick had reined in her horse and awaited his answer.

"I think," Montagu said slowly, "I should rather resent anybody's interfering with them."

"Ah, then, I expect mother's right after all. She generally is. But to see things going wrong and sit still and do nothing drives me perfectly wild. I'm not of a patient disposition," and Herrick rode up the drive at a pace that went to prove the truth of her assertion.

CHAPTER XIX

MAINLY CONVERSATIONAL

"A bin of wine, a spice of wit,
A house with lawns enclosing it."

R. L. S.

WHEN Montagu and Edmund had been a week at Bredon Manor it seemed to them that they must have known the house and the household always, so dear and familiar had both become. Nothing so pleasant could be entirely new, and Edmund, who had a good memory for certain quotations, was never tired of repeating, as he appropriated the deepest and most comfortable chair in the hall, "This is my home of love: if I have ranged like him that travels, I return again."

It is possible that the presence of Lady Alicia gave colour to the fiction that they were old *habitués* at the Manor House. It was she who always spoke of them as "those boys," a habit speedily acquired by the rest of the family. And Lady Alicia was so little changed. Upright as ever; just as dictatorial: speaking her mind with the same serene conviction that hers was the only possible sane opinion upon any subject whatsoever. She was the only human creature whom Herrick found it quite impossible to "get round," and that young lady stood in considerable awe of her grandmother in consequence. Lady Alicia Carruthers had a wonderful memory, and reminded "those boys" of

many an incident in the kind, simple old days. She had whole-heartedly admired but few people in her long life, but their aunt had been one of them.

Edmund never ceased proclaiming that he had lost his heart to a certain beautiful American he had met at Torthorrel. She was the only daughter of a multi-millionaire, who was in New York. "Vera says," Edmund remarked proudly, "that if in a year we are both of the same mind, she'll make it all right with her father, and he'll never see his only daughter starve . . . or her husband," he added gaily; "but when I marry I shall need to leave the service, for she says she'll have no use for a husband everlastingly sailing in a little ship while she sat in the parlour wondering what he was up to."

Montagu had considerable experience of Edmund's engagements, and was not seriously perturbed. What did somewhat upset his equanimity was that Edmund's understanding with the fair New Yorker in no way prevented his flirting outrageously with Herrick, who accepted his homage with her usual cheerful graciousness. They came near to quarrelling once though, but Montagu did not know this at the time.

A few days after his arrival Edmund sought Herrick where she was industriously snipping off dead leaves in a greenhouse. She wore a large blue pinafore, which hung straight from her shoulders like a chiton, and long brown gloves. The day was cold, the greenhouse was warm, and in it was one chair, upon which Edmund promptly sat down.

"Why did you never answer my letter?" he asked; "it was very unkind and unsympathetic; you might have said you were glad I got out of that awful hole."

"You might have known I was glad without my needing to say so."

"I wasn't at all sure, you looked so awfully severe when I turned up that afternoon with the book you had carelessly left behind—'Red Roses,' or something foolish."

"'Grey Roses,'" Herrick corrected. "I think it would do you good to read that book. I'll lend it you while you are here if you like."

"Did your people mind about that bridge?"

"What bridge? Last night, do you mean? Why should they mind? Did they lose?" Herrick turned a perfectly innocent face towards the handsome sailor, who, astride the chair, leaned his arms upon the back. He nodded at her slowly, as if weighing her mental attitude and arriving at no conclusion.

She was standing, her scissors suspended above a geranium which bristled with brown leaves. The blue of the pinafore threw up the whiteness of her chin in strong relief, but Edmund's eyes were fixed upon her mouth.

"Do you generally treat confidences with such scant interest?" he asked.

"What do you mean? I hope I treat all *confidences* as such."

"Well, I told you what a mess I'd got into over cards at the Lowenbaums', and then I made a great effort—it really was rather difficult to manage—to send you word that I'd got straight again, and you took no sort of notice at the time. Nor have you said a single word to me about it since, and I've been here nearly a week; weren't you the least little bit glad?"

"Of course I was glad that you had got out of the difficulty—and there was an end of it."

"But there isn't an end of it if people can throw it in my teeth that I went whining to you because I'd lost money at cards."

The colour flooded Herrick's face, and her eyes suddenly grew very dark. She picked up her basket and laid her scissors on the top of the dead leaves. She deliberately turned her back upon Edmund and opened the greenhouse door.

"If I stay here any longer," she said over her shoulder, "we shall quarrel, and that will be unpleasant for both of us. I don't understand what you are driving at, and whatever it is there's likely to be a rather bad smash before you reach the end of your journey."

Edmund sprang to his feet and to the door, pushing it outwards to shut it.

"Oh, please wait!" he cried. "Don't go away till I explain; I can explain really, and I see now I'm entirely in the wrong, but you won't think so badly of me if you will only listen . . . please . . . please."

Edmund was strong, but so was Herrick. For a moment it seemed that she would succeed in pulling that greenhouse door wide enough to escape. But suddenly it struck her that this sort of thing was very undignified, and Lady Alicia was always reproaching her for her lack of dignity. She loosed the handle, the door shut with a bang.

"Well," she said, "will you kindly explain what you mean by implying, deliberately implying, that *I* told people you had to come whining to me because you lost money at cards at the Lowenbaums'? You certainly have an exalted notion of my sense of honour."

Herrick was undoubtedly very angry. All the pretty colour had left her cheeks now, and she looked,

as Edmund afterwards described it, "about seven feet high."

Down on his knees in the very middle of the wet, red-tiled pathway of the greenhouse did Edmund go, regardless of most beautiful knickerbockers.

"If you look like that," he wailed, "I can't tell you anything. You paralyse me with terror. Please sit in the chair, and then perhaps I can see to the top of you."

Herrick sat down on the chair. Her cheeks grew rosy again, and her eyes were quite blue as she turned them upon the grovelling Edmund.

"Get up," she said, "you most ridiculous boy. But you do suggest such horrid things. I don't think I'm mean and shabby, and you make me out to be both . . . and it hurts."

The floor under the flower stands was covered with fine clean "Bristol chippings" on either side of the central path. Edmund picked up a handful, cast it upon his head and beat his breast. Then, for the red tiles were very damp, he arose and stood before the offended damsel, the very personification of abject penitence.

"Last night," he began in lugubrious tones, "we dined, all of us dined, at Bredon Delafosse. That is so, is it not?"

"Of course it is; do come to the point, and not be such a goose."

"After dinner—the ladies had left the table, so you must take my miserable word for it—the noble lord proceeded to discourse upon the frivolous classes of the present day, comparing them with those of the past, greatly to its advantage. Upon my word he made out a pretty good case for the early nineteenth century. . . . Do you think if I moved those two

flower-pots I might sit on the shelf?—an upright posture diminishes my eloquence. Thank you; that is decidedly better, but if you had been of a really forgiving nature you would have offered me a share of the chair."

"Do go on," Herrick interrupted impatiently; "what has all this to do with what we were talking about?"

"Everything, my dear cousin, has a beginning, a middle, and an end—except, as your Janet would remark, a pudding, 'and that has twa'—but this is a digression. . . ."

"You do nothing but digress. I may as well go on clipping off dead leaves if you are going to be such an age."

"No, wait where you are; I like to look down upon you, it gives me courage. As I was about to remark when you interrupted me, I have now reached the middle of my narrative. Lord Delafosse proceeded to point out that although men were evil-livers in his day, plenty of 'em, yet they never pretended that there were no good people and they believed that on the whole it was better to be good than bad. Moreover, although they frequently, one might almost say habitually, got drunk, yet they did it on good honest wine, and not on morphia or cocaine. Again, they gambled atrociously, but if they lost, they lost. And no one except the gamesters were any the wiser. They didn't go about whining over their losses . . . and it seemed to me—I may be absolutely wrong—that he looked at me: and remembering I had met him at your house the very afternoon I had made such an ass of myself in that wood, I thought it was more than likely you had told him. . . . I shouldn't have blamed you a bit

if you had, it was only what I deserved . . . and I felt beastly. . . . Do you forgive me?"

Herrick looked straight into Edmund's pleading eyes and held out her hand: "It was perhaps a natural mistake on your part," she said gently, "but it is a pity always to conclude that some one else has done the—ungentlemanly thing."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have never mentioned my silly troubles to any one, or my letter?"

"Why should I? Why should you expect me to do what I suppose you, yourself, wouldn't think of doing? Certainly I have never breathed a word about it to a soul. I had forgotten all about it myself till you raked it all up again."

Edmund seized the hand in the long brown glove and shook it violently. "There's not one girl in fifty would have held her tongue," he cried. "Why, one always *expects* girls to talk."

"I fear," Herrick said huffily, "that you judge other people by yourself. You have wasted my morning, and now I must go back to the house. If you were as young as Roger—who, by the way, has twenty times more sense, I should be inclined to smack you, but I suppose you can't help it, so I must forgive you. Please bring that basket."

. . . . . .

The library at Bredon Manor was the most comfortable room in the house. It stood in a wing at the end of a long passage right away from the rest of the living rooms, had two big mullioned windows facing south and looking over the woods towards Surrum, and was ideally peaceful and secluded. Walled round with books bound in mellow, golden-brown calf, with two solid writing-tables and innumerable commodious, veritably easy chairs, it was a scholar's paradise: yet

Montagu liked it least of any room in that so pleasant house.

William had not hurried himself in the collecting and collating of his uncle's voluminous manuscript notes regarding Aristotle's *Nikomachean Ethics*. But every now and then he had worked at them with a pleasurable sense of leisurely erudition—a feeling that the coming of Mr. Holt had stimulated to a mild ardour—and he had written a preface to the completed work which both he and his neighbour at Surrum considered apt and enlightening.

The book—preface, editor's notes, text and index, a most exhaustive index—was actually ready for the publisher shortly before Montagu's arrival, but William had deferred its departure until his guest came to Bredon. Now that his uncle's ward was actually under his roof, William thought it an excellent opportunity to obtain his opinion upon the completed work, and insisted upon going through the whole thing with him minutely and methodically, which took time.

Thus it was that Montagu spent every morning—except a hunting morning (oh, blessed hunting mornings! and Edmund was not much good across a horse)—shut up in the library with William, reading and discussing with him the masses of manuscript arranged in orderly piles upon one of the sturdy desks. There they stayed till the luncheon bell rang, while Edmund was free to run about and play with Herrick and enjoy himself enormously. Montagu fervently wished that Aristotle, ere his prime, had managed to offend the despotic Dionysius, in which case there is little doubt that the *Nikomachean Ethics* had never seen the light. Indeed, William was sometimes almost shocked at his companion's manifest lack of enthusiasm, and remarked to Margaret that Montagu's interest in his

classical studies had evidently waned considerably during his sojourn in India, concluding with the remark that "these departmental fellows always get a bit narrow." Many a time did Montagu's heart smite him as he reflected how kind it was of William to have undertaken the work at all. Most of all did he feel compunction as he handled the yellowing papers covered with his guardian's beautiful, microscopic writing. Then would he wrestle with his wandering thoughts and apply himself to the matter in hand with some success. But when William prosed about his PREFACE, and every editor thinks the preface by far the most important part of any book, Montagu spent the time in wondering what Herrick and Edmund were doing, and his host was really quite justified in his comments upon the mental deterioration of his guest.

One afternoon, however, the fates favoured Montagu, for Edmund had gone to Surrum to call upon the Lowenbaums. He bewailed the necessity, but everybody, even including Lady Alicia, agreed that it was his plain duty to go. William, Lady Alicia, and Margaret had walked over to see Lord Delafosse, and Herrick declared her intention of going to see her old women at the almshouses on the Marlehouse road. Montagu waited in the hall till his lady appeared clad in Lincoln green, carrying a rather large basket. Montagu relieved her of the basket, and asked very humbly if he might carry it for her to the almshouses and wait outside while she paid her visits.

"I shall be very glad if you will carry it, for it *is* heavy, and the men are all busy to-day; but you needn't wait outside. Come in and see old Mrs. Brinkworth with me, and you can stop and talk to her while I go and see the others."

"Who is old Mrs. Brinkworth?" Montagu inquired.

"Old Mrs. Brinkworth is our gardener's mother, and she used to live with Brinkworth at the lodge, but middle-aged Mrs. Brinkworth couldn't stand her. She's the best tempered woman alive is Brinkworth's wife, but . . . old Mrs. Brinkworth was too many for her, and soon after we came here middle-aged Mrs. Brinkworth came to mother and said 'as she'd 'ave to leave Brinkworth, that she would, if that old 'ooman stopped on, for she did make 'er life an 'ell upon earth, that she did, with 'er fault-finding, and 'er caddle and makin' such a paladum over every little thing. You may say as it's dribs and drabs, mum, but dribs and drabs it is as wears away a stone, that it be.' "

Herrick paused after her life-like imitation of middle-aged Mrs. Brinkworth, evidently expecting some admirative comment from Montagu. He did not fail her.

"What a good mimic you are! Do go on—what happened?"

"Well, mother thought and thought. . . . You see, old Mrs. Brinkworth was much too poor to live by herself and Brinkworth is her only son . . . she has eight daughters."

"Why couldn't she live with one of the daughters?"

"Well, some were married, and the husbands wouldn't hear of it——"

"Naturally," Montagu ejaculated.

"And some were in service and of course *they* couldn't have her, and at last mother thought of the almshouses and Lord Delafosse got her a nomination, and now she's a very grand person indeed, as you'll see."

The almshouses were wonderfully pretty. An at-

mosphere of immemorial peace hung about their grey gables and lowly Gothic doorways, and old Mrs. Brinkworth's sitting-room would have been most cheerful with its handful of bright fire, but that it was so painfully, so aggressively clean and neat.

Montagu was immediately and dismally conscious that his boots were dirty, and noticed that Mrs. Brinkworth had fixed her eyes upon them at the moment of his entrance.

She was a fresh-coloured, handsome old woman, much crippled by rheumatism, as are so many of the poor on the Cotswold Hills, and she had plenty to say; and when Herrick had listened to her complaints, she placed her little parcels slyly on a shelf at the side of the fireplace and rose, saying, "I must go and have a look at my other friends, Mrs. Brinkworth. You'll entertain this gentleman for me, won't you?" and Herrick departed.

Forthwith Mrs. Brinkworth began entertaining Montagu, and she shared with many others the idea that to ask questions is the surest way to pass the time agreeably.

"You be from furrin parts, sir, I year," she said affably. "You beant near so dark as I should 'a thought. I seed a Hinjian once and he were very near black as that there grate. Now you, sir, be quite like a Henglishman. 'Ow do it come to be?"

"A great many Englishmen are in India, Mrs. Brinkworth," Montagu began.

"But you lives there, sir, doesn't you?" Mrs. Brinkworth interrupted.

"I live there part of the time, but I come home too, you know, and by and by I shall come home altogether."

"'Ow soon med that be, sir?"

"Oh, in another twenty years, I expect."

Mrs. Brinkworth shook her head. "That's a long-ish time, sir; why, you may be eat by a tiger long afore that, and then you'll never come 'ome no more. I yeard as there was one of them there nadobs a-staying in these parts, and I says to 'im as told me, 'You mark my words, my man, we don't want none o' them 'ere, a-marryin' of our young lady; she's not for the likes of them, she's not. She ought to marry a lard or a member of parlyment, and drive in 'er carriage with blue ribbons on the 'orses' 'eads. I couldn't never fancy 'er a-riding on a helefant with leopardses a-playing in 'er back garden ready for to spring on 'er whenever 'er back was turned. No,' I says, 'we wants no nadobs 'ere a-castin' sheep's eyes at our young lady,' " and Mrs. Brinkworth suddenly closed her toothless jaws with a snap.

Poor Montagu sat on the edge of his chair feeling desperately hot and uncomfortable. Whether Mrs. Brinkworth directly referred to him as the "nadob" of nefarious designs he did not know, but he was convinced that she was trying to point out, what he was only too conscious of himself, that the man who made any attempt to carry off Miss Herrick Wycherly to "furrin parts" would meet with short shrift and scant sympathy from any of that young lady's numerous friends.

"You are all very fond of Miss Herrick," he said feebly.

"You're right there, sir, and we ain't the only ones as is fond of 'er by all accounts; but I will say this, as Miss 'Errick do treat every one the same. If you'll believe me, all the years as I've knowed 'er *she've never brought one single stick of rhubab* to these buildings,

and there's not many ladies, hold *or* young, as you can say that for."

Montagu felt that he ought to look very much astonished, though he really failed to see why such forbearance was so singularly meritorious.

"Peas she've brought, and once she brought sparer-grass—though I can't say as I thinks much of it, the gentry do like it—and beans, both broad and kidney, an' plums an' pears—an' grapes, if so be as any one be ill; but the things as us can grow ourselves she don't bring, and we takes it uncommon kind of 'er, I can tell you. And she don't never read to us, for which we thanks the Lard as made 'er. She's a pet of the Almighty, that's what she is, and so you must see, sir, as it ain't no use for no 'eathen nadobs to come round after 'er—now *is* it?"

"Not the least in the world, I should say," Montagu responded gloomily.

Mrs. Brinkworth looked at him hard over the tops of her spectacles. "I'm glad you sees it so sensible, sir, I'm sure," she said dryly.

At this moment Herrick returned, and Montagu heaved a great sigh of relief as they started on the homeward way together. "I *do* sympathise so with middle-aged Mrs. Brinkworth," he exclaimed; "that is a truly terrible old woman."

"If you take her the right way, she's as mild as any sucking dove. You must have annoyed her somehow—what did she say?"

"She spent part of the time in singing your praises: there she was delightful; but she also proceeded to point out logically and at length how hopeless it was for any one who did not live in England so much as to look at you, and she said very severe and unkind

things of some unfortunate intruder whom she called a 'nadob,' who was supposed . . ."

Herrick stopped short in the road and gazed at Montagu in amazement. A young man carrying a large empty basket on one arm is not a romantic figure, but Herrick only saw Montagu's face, and it was so perturbed and so sad that her own changed suddenly from its expression of astonished amusement to one of extreme confusion, and she hurriedly walked on.

Montagu, walking close at her side, continued his story as though nothing had happened.

". . . who was supposed to be hopelessly in love with her. Now, by 'nadob' I suppose the good lady means 'nabob' . . . but suppose some poor fellow, nothing like so rich or splendid as the nabob of old times, suppose he dared to fall in love . . . would he have any chance . . . any faintest chance?"

Faster and faster did Herrick walk, but Montagu kept step. "Will you just consider the possibility? just familiarise yourself with the idea?"

There was a long silence, then Herrick said softly, "It is evidently not safe to leave you alone with my old women. They put all sorts of absurd ideas into your head."

"The idea has been there for six years," said Montagu.

CHAPTER XX

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

"Fair with honourable eyes,
Lamps of an auspicious soul."
D. G. ROSSETTI.

THAT night, while Janet was brushing out Herrick's hair, William Wycherly knocked at his daughter's door. She sent her old nurse away, put him in the armchair by the fire, and stood on the hearthrug smiling at him, very tall and slim in her straight blue dressing-gown.

Her father held an open letter in his hand, but he did not speak for a moment, and when he did it was only to murmur half to himself:

"Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn."

"Dear dad, it is so nice of you to come and see me all by our two selves."

As Herrick spoke she drew up a stool and sat down, leaning her head against her father's knees. Her back was towards him, and he gathered up a strand of her soft, wavy hair, turning the end round his finger.

"I don't seem to have a chance of seeing you alone during the day, little lady, we are such a full house, but to-day I had a letter from Richard Bellingham, and my answer depends entirely upon you. He asks, quite in the good old-fashioned, stately fashion,

whether he has my permission to make you an offer of marriage, also if I will be so good as to find out from you whether there is any chance of your receiving such an offer favourably, and if so he will come down to Bredon at once."

"He may stay away, dad. There is not the slightest use in his coming. I wouldn't marry him if he . . . I wouldn't marry him under any circumstances."

Herrick turned round upon her stool so that she faced her father; then she laid her head against his knee and looked at him with the faithful, admiring eyes he loved so well.

"Bellingham is an excellent fellow, Herrick. He would make a good husband. He is well off, he is making his mark in Parliament, and will very probably be in the next Cabinet. He can give you just the kind of life you are most fitted for, that I would like for you. . . . What have you against him?"

"I've nothing *against* him, daddie, but . . . I should loathe him as a husband."

Herrick spoke with considerable energy and her father looked rather surprised. "Then you have already considered him in that capacity?" he said.

"Well, daddie, when he was staying with the dear old *Sire* in summer, he was very . . . polite . . . and I thought he rather liked me . . . and I saw a good deal of him, and a girl naturally thinks of these things, sometimes. . . ."

Herrick had always been on terms of the most perfect intimacy with her father, and she spoke as frankly and simply as she had done when she was six years old.

"Do you know this is the fifth man you have refused during the last two years?" said William. "Don't you want to get married, child?"

"I intend to get married," Herrick said very decidedly, "but . . . I require certain qualities in the man I shall marry, and Mr. Bellingham does not possess them. Listen, daddie, this is my most secret heart—I would not show it to any one else in the world—I want to be married, I want to have children of my own. I'd rather have children of my own—sons I'd like best; I shall be so proud of them—than positions in Cabinets, or peerages or anything; and when a man asks me to marry him, I always think, 'Now will he be nice to the boys by and by?' And if I think he wouldn't be nice, if I think he'd be selfish or snubby or cross—parents are like that sometimes, I've seen them—then I simply put him out of my mind. He won't do. You see, all my life I've lived with delightful, unselfish people. I dare say it has spoiled me, perhaps it has made *me* selfish . . . but I know how a little child *ought* to be treated from personal experience, and I'm going to see that my children get that treatment—do you see? Of course," she added, "I shall need to fall in love *first.*"

William could not see his daughter very clearly as she lifted her head from his knee and looked into his face with earnest eyes.

"But why?" he asked, "should you conclude that Bellingham would be other than the most admirable father? I believe him to be a thoroughly good fellow."

"Mr. Bellingham is so busy looking after the universal that he neglects the individual. He is selfish. He was selfish to Lord Delafosse; I saw it, and I was angry. He is ready enough to talk about his theories for the better housing of the working classes and his Bills in Parliament and his County Councils, but he never noticed whether my poor old Sire had a leg rest. And the under-gardener's baby fell down on the gravel

right in front of him and he never stooped to pick the poor mite up. He is a good man, dad—I've no doubt he's a very good man—but I'd rather marry a bad man with a kinder heart. He may do most wonderful things for England, and I shall admire him extremely, but if I was his wife and he was unkind or selfish to a little child, any little child, I should hate him."

William Wycherly put his hand under Herrick's chin and stooped forward and kissed her. He got up from his seat, and she too rose to her feet. Suddenly he put both his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes, asking hoarsely, "Is there any one else?"

Herrick did not flinch, but her face looked very rosy in the firelight as she whispered, "I don't know yet. Directly I do know I'll tell you, my own dear dad—I'll tell you the very first."

William Wycherly kissed his daughter again and went out.

Herrick sat on by the fire dreaming. A little scene of the previous afternoon came back to her, and her eyes grew soft and tender. A large party, including Cynthia and little Roger, had gone to the circus at Marlehouse. The big circus was full; on the benches, ranged round the sawdusted arena, sat the schoolchildren, squeezed and huddled together in a ring of uproarious appreciation. The performance was at its height and the clowns were buffooning it with the best.

But there was one dissentient voice—a large, heavy baby, held with painful solicitude in the arms of a small girl who was positively extinguished beneath her burden—objected to the clowns. Their capers, their jokes, above all, their songs, seemed to jar upon his feelings. The very sight of Mr. Merriman was quite sufficient to send him into such paroxysms of vocif-

erous woe as almost drowned the raucous voices of the legitimate performers.

Children began to be indignant, and older folk cast angry glances in the direction of the poor little foster-mother, who would vainly change arms and try to settle the baby in a more comfortable position, while kindly disposed neighbours offered crumbly biscuits and sugar-sticks for his consolation. But he only choked on the biscuits and made frantic efforts to poke out his own eyes with the sugar-sticks.

That baby evidently disapproved of dramatic representations of any sort whatsoever, and at each fresh "turn" howled with increasing vigour. At last the stout lady who had sold programmes leant over the strip of tattered red baize separating the twopenny people from the more expensive places, and whispered angrily to the thin, careworn little guardian. Once more she shifted him to her other arm, patting him and whispering soothing words of endearment, but to no purpose: the baby threw himself back roaring and struggling.

The little girl sighed, stood up somewhat unsteadily, braced herself to the burden, and casting one last, longing look at the clowns, set her face towards the entrance with flagging feet. As she slowly wended her sad way through the narrow passage separating the crimson-covered seats of gentility from those of the "twopenny 'alfs" she had just left, Montagu, sitting with Roger at the end of a row, leant down as she passed and pushed something into the dirty little hand spread with such ludicrous inadequacy of support over the baby's broad back. "Awfully rough luck," he murmured; "you come back to-night without that kiddie."

The child stopped, peeped incredulously over her

burden at the shilling in her hand, then looking upwards at the donor with a gaze of rapturous gratitude far more eloquent than words, hoisted the heavy baby once more, and went out into the chilly afternoon.

"We were all sorry for that little girl," Herrick thought to herself, "but he was the only one who did anything."

William Wycherly went back to his wife and Lady Alicia, who were still sitting by the drawing-room fire awaiting the result of his embassy.

"No use," he said as he came in; "she won't hear of the fellow."

"I could have told you that," Margaret said quietly.

"What does that girl expect?" Lady Alicia demanded indignantly; "is she waiting for a prince of the blood or what? Will she never think any man good enough for her? She'll go through the wood and through the wood till she picks up a crooked stick at last—you see if she doesn't."

"I fear," William said ruefully, "that the stick is already picked up, without much search either."

"What? Who? Not Montagu?" cried the old lady in great excitement; "of course *his* condition is indecently manifest, but Herrick . . ."

"If she loves him, she shall have him," William said very gravely, "but he must leave India."

"He will never do that," Margaret said quickly, "and it would not be fair to ask him."

William turned upon her with something like anger in his tone. "If he cares more for India than for my daughter, let him stay there and have India, he shall certainly not have both."

"But what is the young man to live on?" demanded the practical Lady Alicia. "He has no private means and he has splendid prospects there. Lord Delafosse

told me so—he'd been talking to some big-wig about him. He is thought well of in that service."

"If I ask him to give up India of course we must make it up to him," William answered loftily. "I have no doubt some post could be found for him at home. Lord Delafosse——"

"The way you all deify that reprehensible old man passes my comprehension," Lady Alicia exclaimed angrily. "Allow me to tell you that the present Government is tottering, and with a Liberal Government in power he won't have a jot of influence, and we all know what to expect next session. . . . But has Montagu asked her?"

"He has not asked *me*," said William grimly, and stalked out into the hall for his candle.

"What is your opinion, Margaret? You are very quiet." Lady Alicia clicked her knitting-needles irritably.

"Mother dear, what is the use of discussing it? If Herrick is in love with Montagu, and I am not sure that she is, I presume she will want to marry him. Till we know she does want to marry him . . . or for the matter of that till we know that he wants to marry her . . ."

"It is my opinion," Lady Alicia interrupted, folding up her knitting, "that there will shortly be a considerable disturbance in this family, and I am glad that I shall be out of it. Your sister Hariot wants me to go to her on Saturday. I have not the slightest doubt that whatever that wilful young daughter of yours chooses to do she will do. So just prepare yourself beforehand. We'll sleep upon it, anyhow."

Next day William declared at breakfast that having much business to transact he would have no time

that morning to devote to the *Nikomachean Ethics*. It is possible that a certain tension in the atmosphere warned him that if he and Montagu were alone together his guest would broach the subject that had robbed William of his rest the night before. But if he thought to put off the evil day by any such palpable device he was mistaken, for breakfast was no sooner over than Montagu asked him for ten minutes' conversation in the library before the business of the day began.

The young man's speech was very brief and apposite. "I cannot stay on in your house," he concluded, "accepting your most delightful hospitality, without telling you that I love Herrick with all my heart and soul and strength, and that I would do anything that a man can do to win her for my wife."

William listened patiently enough, but his face expressed very little pleasure in this announcement. "Have you spoken to my daughter?" he asked.

"I have said nothing definite, but I think she can hardly fail to know what I feel."

"I fear that you have been at small pains to conceal your feelings," William answered a little bitterly.

"But why should I, sir?"

"That, of course, is for you to decide. Now, look here, Wycherly, I like you—we all like you—but you and Herrick have known each other barely a fortnight. You must give me your word of honour that you will not make love to her in any way for another month. Your visit here terminates in a few days more. I shall not ask you to stay on. You will go back to our good friends at Surrum, as arranged, and you are welcome to come here and see Herrick from

time to time. In the meantime I must think over things. It is no small matter to ask a man for his only daughter; and in your case there is so much to consider besides the actual fact of marriage. Don't you think that you ask rather unusually much if you expect us to give you Herrick, and not only to give you Herrick, but allow you to take her thousands of miles away from us . . . but that possibly might be arranged . . . if you care for her as you say you do. Her happiness is the dearest thing in the world to me, and if she loves you—mind, I am not at all sure that she does—her mother and I would make any sacrifices to ensure her happiness. But for the present . . . wait. Can I trust you?"

The two men looked into each other's eyes as Montagu said very earnestly, "I give you my word of honour, sir, that for the four weeks I will try to say no word to Herrick that bears upon the deep love I feel for her. But at the end of that time I *must* ask her, and you, and know my fate. I could bear it no longer. To-day is the twenty-third of November. Four weeks to-day I shall come and remind you of your promise . . . but I don't think I can stay in the neighbourhood . . . I could not see her constantly and trust myself. I will go away with Edmund and come back to the Holts in another fortnight, if they will have me."

"That is as you choose, of course. Remember, I do not forbid you to see her. In fact, I think the more you see of each other the better; but there must be no love-making, and I trust you to observe the spirit as well as the letter of this bond. Personally, I think you would do better to stay."

"With your permission, sir, I think I would rather

leave with my brother than go back to the Holts just yet. I could not trust myself now if I stayed on in the neighbourhood."

"As you like. That is settled, then—but remember, *I* trust you."

CHAPTER XXI

THE COMMISSIONER'S MAIL

"I hope you will consider what is spoke
Comes from my love." *Othello.*

"COWPER'S COTTAGE, BREDON,
"*Thursday.*

"MY DEAR ROGER,—There is little news this week, except that Mr. Wycherly has arrived in these parts and came to see us yesterday night. For fear of worrying you unnecessarily I did not tell you that Roger has been a little deaf lately—nothing serious—but still, there it was. Mr. Wycherly is going to town for the day to-morrow, and offered to take Roger to see an aurist, so I am letting him go. I can tell you what he says by next mail, as this must go to-night or early to-morrow morning. We are quite settled in the house now and like it very much; it is most prettily furnished.

"I hope you are keeping well. Mrs. Lapington came to lunch with me to-day. She proposed herself, as she is stopping at Marlehouse Vicarage. She seems very well. With love from Roger and me,

"I am, yours affectionately,

"CYNTHIA."

"SURRUM RECTORY,
"*November 9th.*

"DEAR MR. REEVE,—This week I have seen both Mrs. Reeve and little Roger, and write at once to report. Mrs. Reeve has certainly been most fortunate

in the house she has taken. It is perfectly charming, and I do hope you will carry out the intention—half formed before I left—of applying for your leave much earlier than you intended at first, and come back in time for the new year. This is beautiful country and you would get some capital hunting. The people round about seem hospitable and kind, and Mrs. Reeve is well pleased with the place. She is looking splendidly well—evidently the Cotswold air suits her. Roger gave me a very warm welcome. What a capital little chap he is! He has a most wonderful memory and a very faithful heart. We have long talks about you and Khafadia and all your household. He forgets no one. My friends at the Manor House are greatly taken by him and try to see as much of him as possible; they are not ten minutes' walk from Cowper's Cottage, so that when I go to them I hope to spend a lot of time with your small son.

"I don't think that Roger has quite recovered his strength since that illness in summer; he looks rather thin and more delicate than I quite like, though he is almost sure to pick up quickly in this splendid air. After measles they noticed that he had become a little deaf, but it turns out to have been nothing serious, as he saw Spence (quite the best man, they say, for that sort of thing) this week, and Spence found that the deafness was caused by the closing of the Eustachian tubes. He blew air up the passages and opened them, and now there is no trace of deafness at all. He says, however, that the boy will need great care for some time to come.

"Salaams and greetings to all friends. I'll write again in a mail or two.

"Yours most sincerely,

"MONTAGU WYCHERLY."

"MORLEY'S HOTEL, LONDON,
November 11th.

"DEAR MR. REEVE,—As I saw your wife and son only the day before yesterday, I feel sure you will appreciate a letter from me. Mrs. Reeve has been lucky in the house she has taken; it is perfectly charming and most convenient. I was down at Marlehouse for two or three days staying with my dear old friend, Mrs. Talbot, wife of the Vicar there, and from her I hear that another member of our Khafadia circle is in their neighbourhood—Mr. Wycherly. I did not see him, but I met some relations of his at Mrs. Talbot's; very pleasant people, I should say—a mother and daughter, the girl quite nice-looking.

"I wish I could give you a better account of Roger, but as you know deceit of any kind is impossible to me—I must be perfectly straightforward, cost what it may; and I am sorry to tell you that I think he is looking very unwell indeed, and so deaf, and that always makes a child appear stupid even when he isn't. It seems such a pity Mrs. Reeve can't find a suitable governess for him, for of course, she is out so much at bridge, and so on, he is necessarily left a good deal to the servants, which I always think such a mistake. As you know, I have never left my own darlings at all, except just now, when they are with my husband's people, and I have a most trustworthy elderly nurse, and he is there too. He is better, but he has had a touch of fever this week which has kept him indoors. You will be pleased to hear that your wife is looking very well. Bredon seems to suit her better than Roger.

"Now, dear Mr. Reeve, I must close, but I thought

you would be pleased to have a little news of your dear ones.

"With kindest regards, in which my husband would join were he here, believe me,

"Yours sincerely,

"LEONORA LAPINGTON.

"P.S.—I really think, and so does Mrs. Talbot, that Mrs. Reeve ought to have some lady living with her—a companion who would also act as governess for Roger would be best—it is surely time he learnt his letters; my little Nora can almost read, and she is only six months older than Roger. Could you not suggest it next time you write to your wife?"

The Commissioner of Khafadia read his English letters in the order in which they are given. Cynthia's letters were seldom enlightening. She wrote what she herself called a fine, bold hand. She averaged three words to a line, and never more than twenty-five to a page, and she had reduced the withholding of every sort of interesting information to a fine art.

Reeve read Montagu's letter twice. He referred to the date at the heading and looked at the post-mark on the envelope, which happened to be particularly clear. The letter had been posted in London two days after it was begun. Reeve took up the letter again and read it very carefully, and he had been too long in his service not to notice that the sentence beginning "After measles" was written in a totally different ink from the first part of the letter. Reeve was a methodical man. Before he read the rest of his letters he took a directory of London from the shelf at his right hand and turned up the letter "S." Without much difficulty he discovered the abode of Ryan Spence, Esq., ear specialist, and its district corre-

sponded with the post-mark on Montagu's envelope.

Then he re-read Mrs. Lapington's letter.

The Commissioner was a man of few words; when he had finished reading Mrs. Lapington's letter he made use of one only, and that of but one syllable.

Turning to the rest of his correspondence, he found among other letters an official communication to the effect that upon his representation of urgent private affairs he would be permitted to take his leave at the beginning of the following month, instead of at the end of March, as had been his first intention.

He had been twenty years in the service, and out of that time had only spent two years at home. Just now and again the Government of India recognises that a hard-working official has certain claims upon its consideration, and it happened that Reeve had made his application at a propitious moment.

He went out and telegraphed to the P. and O. agents in Bombay.

CHAPTER XXII

THE COIL OF THINGS

"The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley."

BURNS.

LITTLE Roger was learning at a comparatively early age to arrange his life for himself. From the inhabitants of Cowper's Cottage he neither asked nor expected much sympathy. No one was actively unkind to him: his mother was sometimes quite good-natured, and took him with her once or twice when Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum came to take her out in his motor; but she did not see much of the child, and he did not miss what he had never had.

With the philosophical stoicism sometimes displayed by quite little children, he faced the monotony of the long, lonely hours he had to spend in Cowper's Cottage. Every day the sun shone through the clouds for some short space, and he was snatched out of his grey environment to bask in the warmth of affection lavished upon him by kindly outsiders.

Herrick was a busy girl. Her life was a refutation of the modern theory that young women of the leisured classes require something far more serious and strenuous than the simple duties and pleasures afforded by ordinary home life. Her mother laid great stress upon the respect and consideration due from the young to the old. Nowadays the trend of public opinion is all

the other way, which makes things very easy and pleasant for the young.

Every day Herrick went to see Lord Delafosse. It might be that she stayed only ten minutes, sometimes she stayed two or three hours to play picquet with him, or to sing to him those old seventeenth-century songs that he so loved. The custom had grown up from the time when he first heard of her visiting among the cottages. "If she goes to see all those disagreeable old women so often," he remarked to her mother, "she may as well include me in her ministrations. I'm far more disagreeable than any of them. I may be cleaner, but why should I be left out on that account?"

And Margaret, realising that, in spite of all his state and circumstance, he was probably the loneliest soul on the Cotswold Hills, often sent Herrick over to see him, till at last he could not get through a day without her. Perhaps the girl's greatest charm for the old lord was her absolute fearlessness; and he allowed her to call him "a cantankerous old darling," and to criticise his opinions and sometimes even his actions, while the rest of his world cringed and trembled before him.

And now Roger was added to Herrick's responsibilities, and his days were punctuated by her appearances. Long hours did he spend watching the Marlehouse Road from the window of the nursery he shared with Grimes, watching for the tall, slim figure crowned by the conspicuously curly hair that even on the darkest winter day seemed to have caught and kept some sunshine. Wychelly Sahib, too, was faithful, and he came nearly always when Mrs. Reeve was out. It almost seemed as though he timed his appearances to coincide with her absence. This was not difficult, for

the Lowenbaums were doing all they could to enliven the neighbourhood, and as Cynthia frequently remarked, there really was "a great deal going on."

Roger's circle of friends was widening. Lately in Herrick's train there had appeared one whom she and Roger called "the sailor man," a person of infinite jest and various accomplishments, whose hair was curly and yellow as Herrick's own, who could make twenty different knots with pieces of string, who danced the sailor's hornpipe in the Bredon hall while Roger looked on admiringly from the safe vantage-ground of Wychelly Sahib's knee.

Then there was Janet, who loved little people and was skilled in a thousand simple arts to give them pleasure. She could manufacture all kinds of wonderful things with bits of paper. Kettles, that certainly held water and could be set upon the fire—that fire surrounded with the high brass fender in the room where Janet reigned supreme; boats, ladders, boxes of all sizes and shapes. Oh, Janet was a most accomplished woman, Roger thought, and once when Grimes spoke disrespectfully of her as "that old Scotchy frump," Roger fell upon Grimes and beat her with his fists, and had to stand in the corner for ever so long afterwards. He was not repentant, but he had already learned that it was wasted breath to argue with an angry woman.

Of late, however, Wychelly Sahib and the sailor man had disappeared.

One day Cynthia got a telegram. She put it away in her desk and said nothing to her household, but by and by the servants learned from outsiders that Mr. Reeve was coming home much earlier than had been expected, and finally the news filtered down to Roger that his daddie was coming—coming soon, com-

ing to Cowper's Cottage—and the little boy went about in a solemn rapture for the rest of that day.

Cynthia was not enraptured.

She was even somewhat annoyed. It interfered with her arrangements for the winter. She was not sure how Roger the elder would assimilate with the Lowenbaums, and although he had seldom interfered in her choice of friends, it would be awkward if he took a dislike to them, for here he would not have any absorbing duties to occupy his time.

Lately she had seen a great deal of Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum. Owing to his kind offices her dressmaker had ceased to pester her for money. He had really been very considerate, very obliging; she was indebted to him "to the tune of a hundred pounds," as he himself would have put it. Not that he ever actually reminded her of the transaction—he was far too diplomatic for that; and Cynthia still posed to herself as the dignified, inscrutable, coldly beautiful mystery. She was not even attracted by Mr. Lowenbaum as she had at one time been attracted by Montagu. He was easy to get on with, she could always understand what he was driving at, or thought she could, and this was an agreeable novelty for Cynthia, who frequently found the observations of her men friends singularly obscure. Yet, almost unconsciously, she at times compared Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum with her husband, and not always to the advantage of Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum. Cynthia was proud of the fact that her husband was a gentleman, "a real gentleman," and she laid much of what was incomprehensible to her in his conduct and conversation at the door of this agreeable fact; and there she really was not far out.

Once or twice during the last weeks she had missed the Commissioner, and even more had she missed the

serene security of the social position which, as his wife, was hers in India. Lately certain people had not been quite nice to her, and Cynthia was singularly sensitive to any fall in the social barometer. The "County," that had been so friendly at first, was distinctly less cordial now. Mrs. Talbot had not forgotten Mrs. Lapington's revelations, and her outraged sense of the proprieties. Tommy and Ronnie called no more for little Roger, who grieved silently at their defection. "They was kinder when I was deaf," he thought sadly to himself. When Mrs. Talbot met Mrs. Reeve so frequently with Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum in his beautiful Panhard car, she did not fail to mention it. Every middle-aged lady on that side of the county was shortly in possession of the damning fact that Mrs. Reeve lived in Cowper's Cottage with no companion, and no nurse or governess for her little boy, and that the little boy was shamefully neglected —Mrs. Lapington again—and it was quite improper for so young a woman to receive gentlemen in her house when her husband wasn't there, &c. &c.

If Cynthia had been ugly and unnoticeable, no one would have said these severe things or found the slightest impropriety in her dwelling alone in Cowper's Cottage for the rest of her natural life. If she had been a little more friendly and approachable there were many women who could have forgiven her for being so exceptionally handsome. But to be handsome and bumptious and beautifully dressed, and, worst of all, that she should be seen continually in the very smart motor of Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum, was unpardonable. Had she not got a nice little dogcart of her own? Why couldn't she drive about in that, quietly and decorously, like other folks?

Not many people at that time possessed motor cars

round about Bredon. Most of them couldn't afford it. Therefore were motors in their opinion synonymous with much more that was rapid—and undesirable.

The Wycherlys were kind and friendly enough, and in fulfilment of her promise to Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum, Cynthia gave a little luncheon party for that gentleman and his sister, Montagu, Edmund, and Herrick. It was quite a success. Montagu expressed his gratitude to Mr. Lowenbaum for putting him on to such a good investment as the horse he had bought at Hanchester, and Edmund was most polite and devoted to Miss Miriam. Herrick was, of course, impartially pleasant to both brother and sister, and they came to the conclusion that she was assuredly "out of the top drawer, but with no stuck-up nonsense about her."

While the young people at Cowper's Cottage were chatting together after lunch, Margaret and Lady Alicia set forth in the victoria to pay a distant call. Their route lay through Surrum, and when they had got about a couple of miles on the way they came upon a broken-down motor car. A stout elderly lady stood by its side, while the chauffeur lay under the car flat on his back in an apparently vain endeavour to find out what was amiss.

It was not in Margaret's nature to pass any one who was in trouble, and she stopped the carriage. The result was that she gave up her seat beside Lady Alicia to Mrs. Lowenbaum, while she sat with her back to the horses on the horrid little shelf which falls to the lot of any third passenger in a victoria, and they drove to Surrum Grange. Good-natured Mrs. Lowenbaum was effusively grateful, and implored them so pathetically to accept a cup of tea that, seeing she would be

really hurt if they refused—and Margaret could never find it in her heart to hurt any one—they went in.

Tea arrived with magical speed, and they were not delayed more than ten minutes.

"May I count it a call, Mrs. Wycherly?" Mrs. Lowenbaum asked pleadingly. "We're such near neighbours."

What could Margaret do but answer that it would be very kind of Mrs. Lowenbaum so to consider it?

Lady Alicia chuckled during all the rest of the drive. "It will be a beautiful story to tell Lord Delafosse," she exclaimed triumphantly; "he will be so angry; but the Jewess is far too clever for us poor Christians."

So it came about that the young Lowenbaums were not quite so grateful to Cynthia as she expected, and they were careful to return Mrs. Wycherly's call the next day but one.

Although Cynthia was not in love with Mr. Lowenbaum, he was assuredly attracted by her. He liked taking her about, because she always looked, as he put it, "so ripping." He was, in his own opinion, a masterful man, and the very fact that Cynthia showed herself so haughty and unapproachable to most people made him the more anxious to bring her to heel; and he had not the smallest doubt that this would be accomplished in time. It took rather a long time, but he was one who thoroughly endorsed the proverb, "It's dogged as does it."

Now that he knew her husband would be home so much sooner than they had expected he was rather annoyed, and he thought that the time had come when Cynthia should make him some tangible return for all his devotion—and his hundred pounds.

Cynthia had not the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. It was part of her pose always

to have some devoted swain in attendance upon her, and she took a childish pleasure in being driven here and there in what her great-grandmother would have called a "fine coach." The vehicle was different, but the idea was the same. It was "smart" to be seen about in a gorgeously appointed motor, and for that reason Cynthia liked it. Mr. Lowenbaum was by no means the magnificent hero of her dreams. He hadn't even a title, and in Cynthia's drama a duke had always played the leading part. But if he hadn't a title, a very large crest was emblazoned upon all his motors, and —Cynthia comforted herself with this reflection—he was quite as rich as some dukes.

She fully intended to repay him the money as soon as possible. At that moment it was not convenient, and she had no intention of letting the Commissioner know how accommodating her friend had been. She knew Reeve well enough to be assured that he would be furiously angry. He was seldom outwardly angry, but Cynthia believed in his capacity for wrath and had no wish to arouse it. Therefore it was that when Mr. Lowenbaum proposed that she should go up to town to do her Christmas shopping before her husband's arrival, and combine that shopping with a theatre or two, she quite fell in with the idea. She knew when Reeve's ship was due at Marseilles, and she allowed time for him to come across France. He had said that it was possible he might stay a day or so in Paris in order to see the daughters of a fellow civilian who were at school there, but he had promised to telegraph to her from Paris and from London. She reckoned that she could easily get two nights in town before his arrival, and be back at Cowper's Cottage to receive him; or, if she ran it too close, meet him in London, which would please him.

Therefore did Cynthia carefully instruct Gegg to open and re-telegraph any telegrams that might arrive immediately they were delivered, leaving her forms addressed to the hotel in London at which she proposed to stay.

She took Grimes with her, as she thought it beneath her dignity to travel anywhere without a maid, and left Roger in the charge of Gegg and the cook, bidding them look after him well and take care that he did not catch cold. She felt pretty sure that Herrick would come in and take him up to the Manor for an afternoon, and she was so accustomed to leaving him to his own devices that she was not in the least concerned upon his account.

She went off by a morning train, giving Gegg last and minute directions about the probable telegrams, which commands that young woman declared she fully understood and would faithfully follow.

Mrs. Mustoe, the cook, was an elderly woman who had for some years past gone out for short intervals at a time "to oblige" ladies. She described her particular method of service as "going out on supploy." She was wasteful, dirty both in work and person, and quite devoid of conscience, but she was an extremely good cook. She was good-natured and easy-going, and her fellow-servants generally liked her, for she winked at every kind of slackness and breach of rules. She was addicted to strong waters, but so far had kept herself well in check, for the post of cook at Cowper's Cottage was an easy one, with a "young missus" who was out a great deal. When Cynthia had guests Mrs. Mustoe bestirred herself, and her mistress had never cause to blush for any dish that was sent to table.

Cynthia took no sort of interest in her servants as individuals, and although she did not wholly approve

of Mrs. Mustoe's appearance, she thought that the woman did well enough.

Cynthia and Grimes left the house at nine o'clock. At eleven a carrier's cart stopped at the gate. The carrier descended and asked for Maria Gegg. He was the bearer of distressing intelligence. Maria's mother, who lived in an outlying village some ten miles off, was very ill indeed, and summoned her daughter to nurse her and look after the children and their father.

"She did say as you was to come as fast as you could lay foot to ground, an' if you comes into Marle-house now along of me, I'll take 'ee back t'other way, as I be goin', an' you'll get there sooner nor if you was to walk. But you must look sharpish, for I can't wait long."

Of course, Gegg departed there and then in a storm of tears and bearing a brown paper parcel. Mrs. Mustoe was most sympathetic, and pointed out that it was truly providential "the missus 'ad gone off that mornin', else sh'd 'ave made ever such a 'ubub about lettin' of you go."

So Roger and Mrs. Mustoe were left alone in Cowper's Cottage, and Gegg had entirely forgotten to say anything about any possible telegrams.

One came that afternoon about two o'clock. Mrs. Mustoe popped it into the soup tureen to keep it safe till her mistress should return. She had a habit of "popping" all sorts of things into all sorts of places where they had no business to be.

It was a long, lonely day for Roger. Herrick never came, and the little boy got chilled to the very bone standing at the garden gate and watching for her. That evening his head ached and his face was very hot. He told Mrs. Mustoe that his throat felt "funny and tight," and he shivered while she undressed him.

"I'll sleep along of you, my dear, in Grimes's bed; you shan't be left alone, and if you should want anything in the night, you just call me and I'll hear you right enough."

This was comforting, but somehow even in bed with a nice fire blazing on the hearth he couldn't get warm. Cold winds seemed blowing down his back, yet his hands and his face were so hot. Roger tossed and turned and turned and tossed.

"I wonder if it's another measle," he wondered sleepily, "my froat does ache so. I wish my daddie would make haste and come. I wish Mrs. Mustoe would come, then I could get some water. I wish——"

At last Roger dropped off to sleep.

In the middle of the night he awoke. His throat was more painful than ever, and his mouth was parched and dry. There was a most extraordinary sound in the room—a kind of low growling that sometimes ended in a dreadfully loud snort. Roger listened, and his blood ran cold with terror. The room was absolutely dark, for the fire had gone out.

Some fierce animal must have got in and was crouching in a corner ready to spring upon him.

"Missus Mustoe! Missus Mustoe!" he called in agony. "What is it? Oh, come to me! What is zat dreadful noise?"

His own voice sounded hoarse and unfamiliar in his ears.

No Mrs. Mustoe answered.

Only that terrible noise continued. Growl, growl; grunt, grunt; snort! Roger leapt up in bed.

But nothing happened.

Only the noise went on.

He began to cry. "Oh, Mrs. Mustoe," he wailed,

"*do* come! I'm so frightened and I'm so thirsty, and I can't get out of my cot. Oh dear! Oh dear! Oh dear!"

No one answered. No one came. Only the noise went on.

Roger cried himself to sleep.

When he awoke the cold grey light of the December morning enabled him to see that Mrs. Mustoe was there, sure enough, sleeping in Grimes's bed, that her mouth was wide open, and that it was she who produced those terrifying sounds.

Roger lay down again trying to assimilate this extraordinary discovery. Mrs. Mustoe continued to snore, and at last it was broad daylight.

Suddenly the door-bell rang, loud and insistent. Still Mrs. Mustoe snored on.

Again the bell pealed. Some one certainly wanted to get in.

Roger scrambled over the side of his cot and pattered over to Mrs. Mustoe's side: "Get up!" he cried, trying to shake her. "Get up!" he called, but not very loudly, for he was so hoarse. "There's some one keeps ringing the bell."

Mrs. Mustoe opened her eyes and shut her mouth: "Law bless me!" she exclaimed, "it be broad daylight. I've bin an' overslep' myself." She hurried on a dress over her nightgown and rushed downstairs.

Another telegraph boy stood at the door, very angry and impatient at having been kept waiting so long and he "having to get back to Marlehouse too."

"Sixpence to pay and was there any answer?"

No, there was no answer. With some difficulty Mrs. Mustoe discovered sixpence in a tea-cup in the kitchen. This time she "popped" the telegram behind the dining-room clock for safety, and went upstairs

to finish her toilet. About ten o'clock Roger and she had breakfast.

The night before, Mrs. Mustoe had found a key that fitted the cellaret in the dining-room sideboard, where she discovered a decanter nearly full of port, one of sherry, half a bottle of claret and a queer, square, dumpy bottle bearing the mystic legend of "D. O. M."

She sampled the three first. She disliked the claret, but found the port and sherry quite to her taste, and despising the use of a wine-glass as a poor thin way of doing things, she had "soom o' that in a moog."

She had some of both, and although she was not actually drunk when she went to bed she was decidedly muddled.

In the morning her head ached, and she felt rather unwell, putting down her indisposition to "that there nasty sour claret as she'd tasted."

Roger, too, had a headache, and Mrs. Mustoe accounted for their united aches and pains by the state of the weather, which was stormy and cold. Roger's throat was still very sore and his sides hurt him as he breathed. He played apathetically with his bricks for a while, and finally fell asleep in front of the kitchen fire. Mrs. Mustoe roused him to come and have dinner in the kitchen about two, and the bottle bearing the device "D. O. M." graced the table.

"Lickoor, they calls it," she remarked to Roger, "and real good liquor it be. It do warm one's inside up beautiful, that it do."

She gave Roger a sip, but he thought it very nasty for it burned his throat.

It is not usual to drink Benedictine in a breakfast cup, and after dinner Mrs. Mustoe became unaccountably sleepy; so much so that she laid her head down

upon the kitchen table among the dishes and took her nap where she was.

The rain came down in torrents and the afternoon was dark and depressing. Roger took up his stand at the nursery window and the house was very still. The nursery fire had not been lit that day.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

"He makes a July's day short as December,
And with his varying childness, cures in me
Thoughts that would thick my blood."
Winter's Tale.

WHEN William Wycherly expressed a wish that Montagu should not leave the Cotswolds during his period of probation, he had acted upon the theory that "absence makes the heart grow fonder." He feared that if Herrick knew Montagu had been sent away on her account she would immediately proceed to endow him with every virtue under the sun and tumble deeper into love with every day of his absence.

William was a just man. He did not wish to give his daughter to this stranger from a far country, but he felt that it would be unjust to the young man to let him go away without telling his daughter that he had insisted upon a period of probation, and that Montagu had preferred to leave during that time.

For a whole fortnight Montagu rushed about the country trying to fill up his time. He went to Portsmouth to see Edmund. He went to London and bought new clothes. He went to Oxford to revisit the scenes of his youth, and from Oxford he went back to "The Bull" at Marlehouse, where he had left his horse, intending to get a couple of days' hunting. He arrived there on the evening of the day upon which Mrs. Reeve had gone to town. In Marlehouse folks

take a great interest in the arrivals and departures of their neighbours, and the manageress of "The Bull" told Montagu next morning that the lady at Cowper's Cottage had gone away. Knowing that Reeve was due about this time, Montagu concluded that Cynthia had gone to meet her husband, wondered whether she had taken Roger with her, and decided to ride over to Bredon to find out.

Lord Delafosse was laid up with gout, and Herrick had spent the whole of the previous afternoon in trying to amuse him. But her heart smote her for neglecting Roger, and when next day she heard from Brinkworth that Cynthia was away from home, she set forth in spite of the rain to see her little friend soon after lunch, intending to bring him back with her if it should clear up.

Thus it was that Roger, watching in the nursery window, saw a young man on horseback and a tall young lady with an umbrella held well forward over her head stop simultaneously at the cottage gate. The little boy flew downstairs to let Herrick in and Montagu rode round to the yard to stable his horse. He found the stable locked and no sign of Golding, who had given himself an afternoon off. There was nothing for Montagu but to tie the horse to the ring in the stable wall, covering him with the "Burberry" he was wearing.

Then Montagu rushed into the house. Herrick, with Roger in her arms, met him in the hall. Her face, so fresh and joyous a moment before, so full of shy delight at seeing him again, was very grave now.

"I don't know what we'd better do," she exclaimed. "This child ought to be in bed—just listen to him *wheezing*. There's no fire anywhere except in the

kitchen, and the cook is so fast asleep I can't wake her. I dare not take him home in this rain. . . . What *are* we to do? There's nobody in the house but that cook. . . ."

"I'll wake the cook up, anyhow," Montagu said with stern determination. "Where is she?"

"I don't think you will," Herrick murmured; "I rather fear she . . . is drunk. There's a bottle of Benedictine . . ."

"Whew!" Montagu gazed at her in horror. "I'll go and see, anyhow," he said.

Herrick carried Roger into the cold drawing-room and wrapped the sofa blanket round him: "I oughtn't to be holding you at all, really, you poor mite, I'm so wet. Oh, Roger, sonnie, have you been all night alone with that dreadful woman?"

"She isn't dreadful," Roger whispered hoarsely, " 'cept when she's asleep, and then she does make such an 'orrid noise."

Montagu reappeared. He shook his head dismally: "No use," he said; "she's quite drunk. Shall I ride up and ask Mrs. Wycherly what we'd better do? Are you afraid to stay here alone?"

"Afraid of a drunk cook? what nonsense! Do go at once and tell them to send the brougham quickly," she said, "and you and mother had better come back in it. Oh, why haven't we a motor? Hurry, there's a good boy!"

Montagu hurried.

Herrick went into the kitchen and got matches. She lit the drawing-room fire, which was laid, and sat in front of it with Roger on her knee, telling him stories and singing nursery rhymes. Even her inexperience told her that the little boy was really ill, and she was anxious and troubled. Presently the door-

his face and whispered a hundred tender words of endearment. The child loved these kind people. Reeve was prepared to take them entirely upon trust.

He and Montagu hunted on tables and chairs and sideboards for the missing telegrams. Reeve vowed tremendous vengeance against the telegraph office at Marlehouse. It did not occur to either of them to hunt in the soup tureen or behind the dining-room clock.

When they arrived at Bredon tea was ready in the hall, and Roger forgot his throat and his headache in the joy of sitting upon his daddie's knee once more. But his breathing was so loud and his cough so continuous that Reeve looked helplessly at Margaret, remarking: "Surely the little chap has got a very bad cold."

"I want you to persuade him to go to bed at once," she said. "I've taken his temperature, and it is nearly 103 degrees. I felt it would be cruel to put him to bed *till* you came, but now I think he must go."

It required considerable diplomacy to get Roger to go to bed, but on his father's promise that he would come and sit beside him and have a long talk the little boy, heavy-headed and listless, permitted Janet to carry him away.

"Ought we to send for a doctor?" Reeve asked anxiously.

"I have sent for him," Margaret answered. "But in the meantime, Janet knows exactly what is best to do; she has had great experience."

Margaret was immensely sorry for Reeve, and proposed that he should go up and see Roger almost at once: thus it was that they arrived at his door while Janet was taking off his boots. Margaret went on down the passage, and Reeve stood looking in at the

pleasant fire-lit room, and neither Janet nor Roger had heard the door open.

As she pulled off the first stocking, Janet bent her head and kissed the little cold, pink foot. Roger clasped her head in his arms: "No one's done that," he whispered, "since Mongolo, my own ayah. I'm a real sahib again now my daddie's come."

"Poor wee lambie," exclaimed Janet, and she kissed the other little foot. "I'll have to rub you with a nasty liniment, but you must just not mind, for it will help that awful hoast of yours."

Reeve shut the door softly. He did not go in. He stood on the threshold, and who knows how love and grief and indignation surged in his heart?

At the end of the passage there was a window with a low seat. He went and sat down there till Roger should be ready. He put his elbows on his knees and stooped forward, his head on his hands. Margaret's room was near the end of the passage and she heard Reeve's step. She opened her door very quietly and looked out. The man's bent figure was only too eloquent, and Margaret had a very tender heart.

She came out and touched him gently on the shoulder. "You must not be too worried about Roger, Mr. Reeve," she said cheerfully. "He has got a bad cold, but taken in time it will probably not be very serious. What puzzles *me* is, where the young woman has gone who generally looks after him. There was a young woman, quite a nice-looking girl, besides Mrs. Reeve's maid, who probably went with her to town. It is too unfortunate that we don't happen to know Mrs. Reeve's address."

The Commissioner lifted a pale miserable face to Margaret as she spoke. "Then there *was* some one

else," he exclaimed. "The child was not left absolutely alone with that drunken wretch."

"I'm perfectly sure about that," Margaret said decidedly. "It is all a most unfortunate tangle, which will be unravelled the very moment Mrs. Reeve returns. Will you come to Roger now? I know Janet will insist upon rubbing him with liniment and he won't like it, and the doctor will probably be here in another hour."

Reeve followed her meekly. It was extraordinary how people always fell in with Margaret's views.

If Mrs. Mustoe had the misfortune to be easily overcome by the potency of such strong drinks as came in her way, she recovered with equal speed. About seven o'clock she awoke in total darkness, and sat up very "muzzy" in the head to try and determine where she was. It was somewhat to her credit that her first thought, when she was able to think, was for Roger. In a regular panic she stumbled off the bed and felt her way downstairs to the kitchen, where she couldn't find the matches because Herrick had taken them. After much hunting and bumping up against various articles of furniture, she remembered she had a box in her pocket. She lit a lamp and went somewhat unsteadily about the house to look for her charge. All she found was a heap of luggage in the hall that had certainly not been there when she fell asleep, and a small, lace-bordered pocket-handkerchief, dropped beside the luggage, marked "Herrick Wycherly."

There was no doubt as to the owner of the suit cases and the one big wooden box. All over the various packages the Commissioner's name was branded and labelled after the fashion of people who travel by P. and O. boats.

Mrs. Mustoe sat down in the hall to consider these things.

It was plain that the master had come home while she was "overcome."

It was also clear that Miss Wycherly had been there, and, in all probability, had taken away Roger—before or after the master's appearance, Mrs. Mustoe could not make up her mind.

Anyway, the game was up.

Cynthia had paid Mrs. Mustoe her wages two or three days before. It was therefore not worth while to wait any longer. Perhaps Mrs. Reeve would never come back. The servants had their own views as to whither her intimacy with Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum was tending.

Mrs. Mustoe was not possessed of many articles of clothing. It did not take long to collect them and thrust them into the ancient brown tin box which had accompanied her to Cowper's Cottage. There was plenty of room in the box, and she providentially filled it with stores, such as tea, coffee, sugar, rice, lard, and dripping. A bag of flour and a packet of cornflour, together with such cold baked meats as were left in the larder, were added to her store. She was careful to take nothing but eatables, for who could declare but that she had bought them for her own use?

The box was pretty heavy when it was packed, but she managed to hoist it on to the kitchen window-ledge and so out on to the flower-bed beneath. She followed herself by the same route, and dragged the box out to the side gate. Providence decrees that there is always somebody to carry a fleeing servant's box. Such porters seem to spring out of the very earth. What Mr. Jacobs would call "a strong, kind-hearted man with no liking for work" happened to pass just at the mo-

ment when Mrs. Mustoe was panting with the exertion of dragging her luggage to the stable entrance. The gardener's wheelbarrow was handy, and the strong, kind-hearted man promised to wheel the box to Marlehouse station, where Mrs. Mustoe promised to follow it shortly. Terms, one shilling now, and another when she got it at Marlehouse. The gardener's wheelbarrow to be thrown into the bargain. Mrs. Mustoe knew that strong, kind-hearted man and he knew Mrs. Mustoe. Their mutual mistrust was such that for a few minutes it seemed that they would not succeed in arranging matters satisfactorily. However, the strong, kind-hearted man having put the box on the wheelbarrow, decided, on finding it rather unusually heavy, that a wheelbarrow was less traceable than stolen goods, a shilling in the hand was something, and there was no doubt that he would receive the other shilling at Marlehouse Station. Mrs. Mustoe had to see a friend first, she said.

The box started upon its journey, propelled by the sturdy one, in the direction of Marlehouse. Mrs. Mustoe went unostentatiously, by the tradesmen's entrance, to the Manor House.

She did not ring the back-door bell, and she walked on the grass border of the flower-beds round the house. She tried hard to see into the dining-room windows, but although "the family" was evidently at dinner, she could not discover of whom it consisted. Then, still carefully keeping to the little edge of grass, she went on round the house till she reached the library, and here a window was open and no blinds drawn.

All the windows at Bredon Manor were mullioned and opened outwards.

The servants had been rather excited over the unexpected arrival of Mr. Reeve and Roger. They, too,

had their own opinion of the *ménage* at Cowper's Cottage, and they believed that Mr. Reeve's arrival during his wife's absence was arranged by him to "catch her." So exciting were their various surmises that the maiden whose duty it was to see that the library windows were shut and the shutters barred before dinner forgot all about them.

Mrs. Mustoe paused at the open window and drew a box of matches from her pocket. "It'll give the neighbours somethin' to talk about besides my goin'," she said vindictively. "Folks as come and kidnap childring wot's left in other folks's care don't deserve no pity. If their curtings *is* burnt 'tis no more than they desarves."

She struck a match and held it in the hollow of her hand till it was well alight; carefully and deliberately she flung it against the muslin curtain within the window. The curtain caught fire, and Mrs. Mustoe hastily departed by the way she had come.

If Margaret had not had such a mania for white muslin curtains within the heavy ones, all over the house, this would never have happened.

During dinner Gawaine usually lay by the fire in the hall. About eight o'clock that evening he became very restless. He wandered into the dining-room and laid his head on Herrick's knee. She stroked him mechanically, but did not pay very particular attention to him because Montagu, still in his riding things, sat opposite to her. They had not allowed him to go back to Marlehouse to change.

Gawaine went out into the hall again, came back into the dining-room; went out, came back, and presently gave vent to a most dismal howl.

It startled everybody.

"Whatever can be the matter with the dog?" William exclaimed; "I've never known him so restless."

They were sitting at dessert when a frightened maid appeared with the announcement, "Please, sir, something's afire somewhere; the 'all's full of smoke."

The library was panelled with oak—old, dry oak; the bookcases were of oak, and before the fire was discovered the whole room was a blazing mass.

They got the hose and played upon the room from outside; they organised a string of bucket carriers, and Montagu and Reeve worked, each of them, like ten men. A groom was sent to Marlehouse for the fire engine, and until it came it seemed as though the Manor House was doomed.

But the fact that the library was in a wing, far from the rest of the living rooms, saved the house. Roger slept through it all, wheezy but peaceful, with the faithful Janet sitting beside him. Word had come that the doctor was over on the other side of the county, but would come first thing in the morning. Careful watch was kept, so that in the event of the fire spreading Roger might be carried downstairs at once; but by midnight the fire was entirely extinguished and the library was a heap of charred ruins. The servants and firemen were refreshing themselves in the servants' hall and kitchen. They had a great deal to talk about. In the dining-room a grimy group was gathered about the table to drink the champagne William had brought up from the cellar.

Herrick, with an extremely dirty face, for she had worked as hard as any man, nodded gaily at Reeve as she lifted her glass: "They can't give you warmer reception than this, Mr. Reeve, when you are made an L.G.," she said, "only we've omitted the garlands."

William exchanged glances with Margaret. What did Herrick know about Lieutenant-Governors and garlands a month ago? Then he looked at Montagu and groaned. "All your precious books and all Uncle Montagu's manuscripts," he said dismally.

"All your five years' work on the *Nikomachean Ethics*," Montagu groaned in reply.

William looked very sad. His learned preface would never be published now.

"Don't groan, poor things," Herrick implored. "We're all in the same boat. My 'Hesperides' is gone too. You were to give it to me when I was twenty-one, dad, do you remember? Still, we might all have been burnt in our beds if it happened later. We've a good deal to be thankful for."

"I fear I have brought very bad luck," the Commissioner said sorrowfully.

"I think it was very good luck for us that you were here to help us." Margaret looked at him very kindly as she spoke. She was pale and very tired, but she alone of the party was clean, for William had sent her up to Janet and peremptorily forbidden her to leave the room.

As she showed Reeve to his bedroom in the small hours, she opened the door of that which held his little son. A night-light was burning, and Reeve saw that Janet had drawn her bed close to Herrick's old cot, where Roger slept. She had taken out the side nearest herself, and although she had forbidden him to put his arms out of bed, she had not been so careful of her own, for one arm was stretched out towards the little boy and her hand was clasped by another small hand peeping above the clothes.

"He is all right, you see," said Margaret.

Reeve did not answer, for his eyes were full of tears.

About four o'clock in the morning Margaret woke her husband up by exclaiming, in horror-stricken tones, "We never sent any one down to Cowper's Cottage to look after things!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MR. LOWENBAUM SHOWS HIS HAND

"If I have faltered more or less
In my great task of happiness;
If I have moved among my race
And shown no glorious morning face;
If beams from happy human eyes
Have moved me not; if morning skies,
Books, and my food, and summer rain
Knocked on my sullen heart in vain;
Lord, thy most pointed pleasure take,
And stab my spirit broad awake."

R. L. S.

CYNTHIA did a good deal of shopping on that first afternoon. She dined with Mr. Lowenbaum at the Carlton, and they went on to the play. After the play he tried to persuade her to go on and have supper at his rooms.

"They turn you out so confoundedly early at these public places."

"I'm not hungry," Cynthia replied truthfully, "and I'm very tired. Besides, there may be a telegram for me at the hotel. Kindly have me driven there at once."

He looked at her queerly. But, as usual, she was not looking at him. However, the chauffeur drove them to the quiet little hotel where Cynthia was staying—where she had stayed with her husband during their early married days.

"I'll come in with you and see if that wire has ar-

rived," Mr. Lowenbaum said, blocking up the door of the *coupé* as he stood on the pavement in front of the hotel, "or shall I go in and see while you wait here? If there *is* one, you may as well come on to my rooms to have supper."

Cynthia stared at him in haughty astonishment.

"I told you I was tired," she remarked; "kindly help me out."

Mr. Lowenbaum followed her into the hotel.

There was no telegram. Cynthia held out her hand and said good-night.

"I'll turn up to-morrow morning, eh?" he asked.

"Not in the morning. I shan't get up till lunch time. London always wears me out. You may come to lunch with me here if you like, or perhaps you'd better come in after lunch, then we might do something."

Cynthia sailed up the staircase looking particularly magnificent in a wonderful theatre cloak she had ordered that afternoon. Mr. Lowenbaum stood in the hall watching her go up, but she never looked back to smile at him. Cynthia cultivated the lofty bearing that is unconscious of its fellow-creatures.

Mr. Lowenbaum lit a cigar and went back to his car.

"You've played this game long enough, my lady," he muttered to himself. "I'm getting a bit tired of it."

He swore softly as the silent motor bore him to his rooms. Cynthia was undoubtedly the handsomest woman of his acquaintance, and the most puzzling; but he felt pretty sure that now he had got her under his thumb. He had a large, flat thumb.

There are two kinds of men who are universally despised by their more chivalrous fellows: the man who lends a foolish woman money that he may get a hold upon her, and the man who accepts money from

a woman because he has already got a hold upon her. It is difficult to decide which is the more despicable. Mr. Lowenbaum belonged to the former class because he had always had plenty of money of his own.

Cynthia passed an excellent night, and did not descend next day until about one o'clock. She was rather surprised that there should still be no message from her husband, but concluded that he was staying in Paris and would telegraph when he left. When she had had lunch she went and sat in the reading-room to await the appearance of Mr. Lowenbaum.

Her escort arrived about three, and the room was quite empty, for most of the other visitors were still at lunch, or had gone out. He sat down on the lounge beside her and remarked irritably, "Why, I thought you'd be ready. You haven't even got your things on."

Cynthia turned a page of the illustrated journal she was reading, saying carelessly, "Oh, I've changed my mind about coming to your rooms for tea—I'd rather go to Prince's."

For answer, Mr. Lowenbaum grasped her firmly with one hand, while he pushed down the paper she was reading with the other.

"Look here," he said roughly, "I've had about enough of this. You're not playin' the game. I've been as decent as I knew how to you, and what have you done in return? It's time this tommy nonsense was stopped."

Cynthia stared at him in speechless amazement at his audacity. At last words came to her, and she said angrily, "How dare you? Let go my arm."

"I shan't let go your arm, and you don't move from this seat till we understand one another. Look here, Cynthia"—it was the first time he had ever called her

by her Christian name, and she shuddered—"if you're decently good to me, I'll make it all right for you all round. I'm tired of all this humbug and pretence, and never so much as a kiss or a thank-you. But if you go on playing this all-fired majestic game any more, I'll send that cheque to your bally husband—I'm a careful man if I'm a bit openhanded, and I get all my cheques back from the bank—and tell him I'll be obliged to him if he'll settle up. And you'll see whether *he'll* believe I lent you the money for friendship. We all know that sort of friendship."

His grasp on her arm loosened, but she sat still as though she were turned to stone. Her little world was tottering; its walls bulged in, ready to fall upon her; there was nothing stable under her feet. One thing only did she know for certain—that nothing would induce her to go with this horrible man.

"Are you coming out with me this afternoon or not? And if so, are you coming where I choose?"

His hot breath was upon her cheek; he leant over her and looked into her eyes.

"Do you understand?" he demanded.

Would no one ever come? Was she to sit there for ever? Then it was that Cynthia did what a woman of better breeding would not have done, but it saved the situation.

"You call a spade a spade, you do," she said quietly, unconsciously falling back into the diction of her girlhood, "and I understand perfectly. I'll come wherever you like, but I won't come this minute, because I want to change my frock. You come back in an hour and you'll find me ready."

"That's a good girl," said the gallant Mr. Lowenbaum; "I knew you'd listen to reason. Why should you pretend any more you're not fond of me? Quick,

give me one kiss, and then I'll be off. One hour, mind. Don't you keep me waitin'."

Cynthia felt that never, never could she cleanse herself from the contamination of that kiss. She went into the hall with him, though her knees bent under her, and stood at the door watching him drive off. Then she rushed upstairs without one scrap of dignity and burst in upon Grimes, who was sitting somewhat sulkily by the window making lace.

"How soon can you pack, Grimes?" Cynthia cried excitedly. "We must go back to Marlehouse at once, so as to be there when Mr. Reeve arrives."

"I can pack in twenty minutes, mum; I've not took much out, as you said we might 'ave to go back any minute. What train do you want to catch?"

"There's one at four. It's rather slow, for it waits at Swindon; still, we can get back to Bredon by eight o'clock. I'll telegraph from the station to Mustoe to have dinner ready. Hurry up, Grimes!"

Feverishly Cynthia put on her own hat and stuck in the pins with trembling hands. She went down to the bureau and paid her bill, explaining, quite unnecessarily, that she had to go home unexpectedly. In half an hour she and Grimes were rumbling in a growler towards Paddington. Grimes looked inquisitively at her mistress from time to time. Cynthia was flushed and nervous, and seemed in a most tremendous hurry to be off, although when they got to the station they found the train did not start until 4.30. Grimes couldn't understand it at all.

At Paddington Cynthia elected to travel second with Grimes; she sent the telegram, and fussed and fumed till the train had started. Only then did she recover the least semblance of her usual dignified tranquillity. The train was very slow, and after a long wait at

Swindon, it started for Marlehouse, arriving there at eight o'clock, half an hour late. There was no dog-cart to meet them as she had ordered, and Cynthia had to wait in the station while Grimes went into the little town to get a cab. For there, cabs don't stand at the station on the chance of passengers.

When at last they reached Cowper's Cottage, the house was in total darkness and the front door locked.

Cynthia was nearly beside herself with anxiety and uneasiness. The cabman and Grimes went round to the back, found the open kitchen window, got in, lit a lamp, and went and let Cynthia in by the back door. The cabman went out and fetched in the boxes, putting them down beside those other boxes already lying in the front hall. He scratched his head and looked enquiringly at Grimes as she paid him. Cynthia, too, had seen those other boxes. For one minute her heart had seemed to stop beating; in the next it was thumping against her ribs. She staggered, rather than walked, into the dark drawing-room, and sank down in her favourite chair by the hearth.

Here Grimes found her lying back, pale and motionless, a few minutes later.

"What ever can 'ave 'appened?" Grimes demanded shrilly. "'Ere's Mr. Reeve's luggage in the 'all and not another soul in the place. I suppose 'e've took Master Roger and sent off Mrs. Mustoe and Maria. Wot do you propose to do, mum?"

"I can't understand it at all," Cynthia said faintly. "Gegg sent me no telegram . . ." and in the immensity of her dismay the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Grimes looked at her somewhat scornfully. She was not fond of her mistress, and she thoroughly disliked discomfort of any kind.

"No fires," she grumbled. "No fellow servants,

such a lonely place. I do declare if I'd 'a' known wot we was comin' back to I wouldn't 'ave come a step of the way."

"Couldn't you make a fire here and in the kitchen?" Cynthia asked almost humbly; "we can't walk back to the town to-night. We must stay here now."

Muttering to herself, and grumbling, Grimes bounced down the passage to the kitchen. In three minutes she was back again, angry and voluble, to declare that there was nothing to eat in the house but a bit of dry bread, not one morsel of anything else, not so much as a spoonful of tea.

In comparison with the other calamity that had befallen her, this seemed to Cynthia but a small matter. To Grimes, however, it was a matter of great and desolating importance. She made such a fuss that Cynthia suggested she should take the key of the cellaret and get herself a glass of wine as there was no tea. She came back, almost flinging the key at her mistress in her rage. "There's nothing there, mum, neither; but there's empty decanters on the kitching table, and it's my belief it's Mrs. Mustoe as have gone off with everything. A trolloping lyin' wicked old woman she was."

In the quiet night the sound of galloping hoofs and of shouting voices struck sharply upon the ear. Grimes ran to the back door, and down the little path to the garden gate and looked out. "It's the fire engine, mum," she exclaimed excitedly when she came back; "I heard them say as the fire's at Bredon Manor."

She ran upstairs and came down again bursting with intelligence. "I can't see much, not through the trees, but there is a red glow, and lots of people running in the road."

Cynthia felt that this was only one more stone in the wall of circumstance that was closing her in. She had had a faint, half formulated idea of going to Bredon Manor and begging for help. They were neighbours, they had always been kind and friendly, but now they had troubles enough of their own. She should offer assistance, not ask for it.

Grimes lit the fire for her, and still she sat on in the big chair where she had sat so often arrogant and perfectly self-satisfied.

"The fell clutch of circumstance" was too strong for her. Her husband had come home, taken Roger, and renounced her. Some one must have told him about Mr. Lowenbaum and the hundred pounds, and he had believed the worst of her. Cynthia was so ready to believe the worst of people herself that she could not realise a more charitable point of view in another. In the circumstances she even felt that her husband was justified in what she believed had been his line of action. If people had told him of Mr. Lowenbaum's constant presence *and* of the cheque, how could she expect him to act otherwise?

And yet . . . as one small star will suddenly appear in the blackest and emptiest of skies, so did a glimmer of hope arise for Cynthia that perhaps Roger Reeve would not quite judge her as she would judge others. He was different. Time after time, that subtle, intangible, incomprehensible difference between them had irritated her in the past. Now it was the one reflection left to her not wholly grievous and afflicting.

Grimes came in, sniffing and grumpy, to ask if she wished to go to bed.

Cynthia shook her head. "Don't wait for me, Grimes. You go now: and then first thing in the morning you must try the village shop again."

Grimes had already tried the village shop that evening, but could make no one hear, as all the world had gone to the fire at Bredon Manor and the shop was locked. Grimes borrowed some tea and dripping from an old woman who was too rheumatic to join the other sightseers, and made herself some supper which she was ready to share with her mistress, but Cynthia refused even a cup of tea, and Grimes went to bed fully determined that she would demand her wages and leave next day. Grimes was not of the stuff that stays by a sinking ship, and she had quite made up her mind that the barque bearing the fortunes of her mistress had already foundered beyond hope of salvage.

Long after Grimes had gone to bed Cynthia still sat by the dying fire. A sense of dreadful inertia overpowered her limbs, but her mind was working with a vigour and activity quite foreign to it. Visions of people and places, forgotten or remembered with but scant affection, followed each other in an unceasing panorama across her mental horizon. She saw her grandmother, worthy, simple, motherly, in the plain workaday clothes of Cynthia's childhood; afterwards, in the black silk and large gold brooch of later and more affluent times. Her grandfather, the rosy-faced, honest little tobacconist, who forbade, in all his many shops, that any children should be served. Her aunts and uncles, all comfortable, respectable persons, whom she had snubbed and offended. They would none of them befriend her now. Perhaps her grandfather . . . Cynthia recalled a hundred instances of his indulgence, his eagerness that she should have a good time. "She is but young, my maid, and uncommon good-looking," he was wont to say, when any one—sometimes an uncle, more often an aunt—remon-

strated with him for letting Cynthia do or have whatever she happened to want.

The fire died down, went out; the lamp burned low.

Cynthia was very cold. She had had nothing to eat since luncheon, as, unlike Grimes, she refused to have any tea while they waited at Swindon. Yet she was unconscious of any bodily discomfort, so great was her agony of mind. People would believe, her husband would believe, she had done that which she most scorned and detested in woman. In all her silly visions of the adoring duke she had never seen herself other than moved to what her favourite writers would have called a "flash of strange tenderness," she might perhaps be induced to place for one instant "a fair white hand" upon his throbbing brow, while in loftiest terms she bade him leave her and return no more. The duke might be as frantic as he pleased; Cynthia de Lisle Reeve might indeed be stirred to pity, possibly even to love: but assuredly never to any compromising betrayal of her feelings. When she was about seventeen she had said to a girl friend, apropos of some demonstrative young draper whom she had snubbed unmercifully: "No man shall ever say of me that he can paw me about." The phrase was crude, but entirely descriptive of Cynthia's attitude towards man in general. And now Gerald Lowenbaum had kissed her, her husband had taken their little son and left her, she was forsaken, and would be a by-word.

She bent forward in her chair, clasping her hands together with a force that drove the rings into her flesh, and prayed that this thing might in some miraculous way be averted. She was not a religious woman, regarding strong and confessed belief as common, and certainly unsmart. Occasionally she went to church and looked at other people's hats and criticised

the music and the sermon. She belonged to the quite numerous class that disapproves of the Bible "because it is so coarse": but now in her overwhelming need, when it seemed that no human aid could succour her, she prayed that this cup might pass from her, and found herself unconsciously repeating something about a broken and a contrite heart. Presently she lay back in the chair again, staring with wide unwinking eyes into the darkness, for the last flicker of the lamp had died out. But it was not darkness that surrounded Cynthia. She saw their verandah in Khafadia, the white light, the brilliant foliage in the garden, her husband in his sun helmet and white drill clothes, Roger in the little shirt of babyhood. And suddenly there came upon this stupid, selfish woman a poignant sense of the realities that she had missed in life, and she sobbed, with dreadful tearless, tearing sobs, until she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion and she dreamed a dream. She thought that she was in a large cage, walled and roofed with iron bars, while the floor was of rough earth and stones that hurt her naked feet. She was clothed in rags, horrible brown rags that hardly covered her; and people came and looked at her through the bars, and there was no place where she might hide. Mrs. Lapington came, and shook her head, and pushed out her lips and said she "had always known it would end in something like this." Lord Delafosse came and glared at her under his heavy eyebrows, and frowned and muttered as he limped away. Montagu came, and she hid her face in her hands. When she looked up again Mrs. Wycherly and Herrick were looking at her sorrowfully, but Montagu had gone. Her grandfather came, her grandmother, many people she had known in Clifton in her girlhood; Mr. Lowenbaum came bearing a long pole

such as men use in otter hunting, and he poked it through the bars and shouted at her, but he couldn't quite reach her, for the cage was so large. Finally, all her servants in Khafadia came in a long procession and stood round the cage, pressing their brown faces between the bars and looking at her with solemn, shocked expressions. This was more than she could bear, and she flung herself face downwards on the cruel earth that bruised her body as she lay. She knew that Roger and her husband would come next, and again she prayed that Roger might not come. "Not little Roger," she wailed, "not little Roger!" Darkness covered her, and she remembered no more.

When she awoke the room was visible in the dark dawn of a winter's morning, and some one stood there holding a lighted candle. As she opened her eyes somebody laid the candle on the floor and knelt down beside her, and she realised that it was her husband.

"Cynthia," he said, "Cynthia, why are you here like this?" He put his arm round her, and drew her head upon his shoulder and kissed her.

The tears, such blessed, blessed tears, ran down her cheeks as she sobbed out: "I thought you had taken sonnie and gone away for ever and left me alone."

"But why on earth should you have thought that? It was you who had gone away; I came home as fast as I could, home to you and sonnie."

"Oh, Roger, husband, don't leave me, don't let that horrible man come after me! I have been wicked and foolish, but I hate him, and I am so frightened; don't let him come!"

She clung to Reeve, still breathless and sobbing.

"What man, Cynthia? Has any one been here in the night and frightened you? What has happened?

Why are you here alone? Why did you not go to bed?"

"I didn't go to bed because I was so miserable. He said he would send you the cheque because I wouldn't go with him, and I know he has done it. Oh, Roger, you can take all my rings and sell them, if you will only pay him and not leave me."

Cynthia tore off her rings one after the other and held them out to her husband in a cold, trembling hand.

Reeve put his own over it, closing it gently over the rings. "You must explain, my dear," he said very quietly. "No one can hurt you now I am here. What is this about a cheque? Of whom are you afraid?"

Gradually, with much incoherence and much repetition upon Cynthia's part, he disentangled the whole miserable story of the hundred pounds, and when it was told, and he stood by Cynthia's side looking down at her as she sat forward, pale and dishevelled, with black smudges on her tear-stained cheeks, her ringless hands grimy, with dirty nails, he felt more kindly disposed toward his wife than he had felt since his arrival at Cowper's Cottage the night before.

Utterly worn out by his exertions during the fire, Reeve slept soundly when he went to bed; but he woke early, drank his tea, which was brought to him by Janet with the cheering news that Roger had had a good night and was certainly no worse, remembered Cowper's Cottage and its incompetent inmate, dressed hastily, and hurried off to see whether any one had broken into the house.

No one had put on the chain and he let himself in at the front door with the key, which he had taken with him. It was about half-past eight when he got there, and not quite light, so he lit the candle Herrick had left in the hall, and then discovered his wife's

luggage lying beside his own. Some intuition led him first to the drawing-room, and there he had found Cynthia.

"What makes you so sure I have got the boy?" he asked after a long silence. "You left him in this house alone with a drunken woman. Any one might have taken him."

Cynthia lifted her eyes to her husband's face. "I know that Roger is safe," she said slowly, "or you would never have come back to look for me."

"He isn't safe; he is ill in bed—I don't know how ill yet."

Cynthia rose unsteadily to her feet. The room grew dark again, and the flame of the candle flaring on the floor rose rocket-like to the ceiling. Her dreadful dream came back to her with cruel vividness. She took a step towards her husband, crying wildly, "That's why he didn't come to look at me," and fell forward into his arms.

. . . . . .

Reeve did not return for breakfast at the Manor House, and before that meal had concluded the doctor appeared to see Roger. His report of the child was not cheering; he pronounced him to have congestion of the lungs, said that he would need great care, and must stay where he was for another week at least. Everything had been done that could be done, and he complimented Janet upon her patient, warned her that his temperature would go up towards evening, and promised to look in again that night. Of course he had to see the scene of the fire, and while he and William were contemplating the mournful spectacle, a note was brought to Margaret from the distracted Reeve, explaining the state of affairs at the cottage, begging her to come and bring something with her for

poor Cynthia to eat, and to send the doctor on if he happened to come to see Roger that morning.

When Cynthia fainted, Reeve laid her on the sofa, and dashed upstairs for water, with which he bathed her face and hands. She soon recovered consciousness, but lay wan and still, apparently unable to speak or move. Then it was that Reeve set forth to hunt up Grimes, and discovered that young woman in the act of drinking tea in bed, which she had made for herself with a spirit lamp. Grimes will not speedily forget the interview that followed.

It was Golding's turn next, when an unexpected, angry, and exceedingly dictatorial master rushed into the stable-yard, commenting somewhat harshly upon his conduct in taking an afternoon off the day before, and inquiring whether he usually waited until after nine o'clock in the morning before he began his stable duties. Golding hurried with that note.

Thus it came about that the doctor took Margaret and a hamper of stores to Cowper's Cottage in his carriage.

When the doctor and Reeve came down from Cynthia, who, by the united efforts of Grimes and her husband had been put to bed, Margaret went up to her, leaving the doctor to discuss the respective conditions of wife and son with the poor Commissioner.

"I'll send a nurse for your wife, but the boy must stay where he is," he concluded.

"But this is dreadful! A child with congestion of the lungs is the last visitor one would wish to foist upon unfortunate people who have just had a fire in their house."

The doctor misunderstood Reeve, and said rather snappishly: "The house isn't hurt, and he'll be as well looked after there as he would be anywhere. Why,

that Scotchwoman—clever as the devil she is, and as ugly, ain't she?—is a perfect nurse; you needn't fear for the boy, I assure you."

"It's not the boy I fear for, it's the trouble to them. . . . I have no right to entail all this extra bother upon them. . . . Would it be of any help to send a nurse for my little boy?"

"You must ask Mrs. Wycherly that. If you're advised by me you'll leave him to that excellent woman. Child seems fond of her, and she's capital. Of course, if you choose to move him, I wash my hands of it, mind. I won't be responsible. I'll send a nurse for Mrs. Reeve directly I get back. She'll soon pull round; mental shock, collapse from want of food, and general anxiety, that's what she's suffering from. Boy's much the worse of the two, mind that. Sorry for you. Sad home-coming. But cheer up——" As he spoke the last words the doctor slammed the door of his brougham and was gone.

Meanwhile, Lord Delafosse, in spite of gout, came to Bredon to ascertain the amount of damage. He had sent a small regiment of men to assist the water carriers the night before, and, of course, offered his hospitality to the whole household should it be required. He found William, Montagu, and Herrick poking among the ruins, lest peradventure so much as one book had escaped. Some few on the wall nearest the fireplace had, but they were none of them Montagu's, nor were they of any particular value.

"I didn't know you had returned to these parts," he said to Montagu, fixing him with bright quizzical eyes; "are you staying with our friends here?"

"I only returned the night before last, sir, and I am staying at 'The Bull,' but I didn't go back last night.

It was so late before everything was over, and Mrs. Wycherly very kindly put me up."

"H'mm!" said his lordship. "Stupid place, 'The Bull,' and confoundedly dear. Better come and stay with me. Our friends here have enough on their hands, by all accounts, without any idle young men hanging about. Better come and stay with me and do some hunting. If you hunt all day, surely we shall be able to support a couple of hours of each other in the evening. Much better come and stay with me."

"You are very good, sir," Montagu began, "but——"

"Then that's settled," the old lord said decidedly. "Go and get your things and bring your horse, and when you've lamed him, as you probably will, I'll lend you another. I'll expect you to luncheon, but you must amuse yourself for the afternoon, mind."

"You *must* go," Herrick whispered hastily, as her father piloted Lord Delafosse away among the *débris;* "he'll be dreadfully offended if you don't."

"Do *you* wish me to go?"

"It would be very agreeable to have you for such a near neighbour," Herrick remarked demurely.

The man and the maid looked at one another, and Montagu turned hastily away. "I can't bear this much longer," he said; "I ought to go far further than Bredon Delafosse, if I am to keep my word."

"To-day," Herrick announced in the tone of one who makes an interesting proclamation, "is the 17th of December. There are innumerable packages to be done up for the villagers at Christmas. Mother has evidently taken up her abode at Cowper's Cottage and Janet is fully occupied with Roger. We want no 'idle young men hanging about' here, as his lordship justly remarked just now, but an industrious young

man, one capable of making nice neat parcels and tying them up with string, would be a real boon."

Needless to say, Herrick found such a young man to her very hand.

Thus it came about that Montagu went to Bredon Delafosse. He and the old lord got on wonderfully well together, and patient Miss Ellenhill wholeheartedly rejoiced at this addition to their party. His lordship was never quite so irascible if strangers were present.

Montagu became very friendly with the Reverend Anthony, who was indeed an excellent fellow, and the time went by faster than might have been expected. He was not allowed to see little Roger, whose temperature went up with a run whenever a fresh face appeared at his door. Even the Commissioner was only given a short and stated time by the inexorable Janet, who was, to tell the truth, very anxious. Cynthia was not allowed to see him at all. She did not "pick up" quite as fast as the doctor had prophesied, but seemed unaccountably weak and languid. The fact was that Cynthia feared to show her face outside her house. She morbidly dreaded the curious eyes of servants and villagers, and she was unhinged and shaken in every fibre of her being, physical and moral. Her husband made no reference to her confession at their first meeting except that three days afterwards he put into her hand a paper acknowledging the repayment of Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum's loan. It was sent by his secretary, a mythical personage invented by Mr. Lowenbaum for the occasion.

"Did he send you the cheque?" Cynthia asked.

"Did you imagine I should wait for that?" Reeve exclaimed—not angrily, not impatiently, but with the total incapacity to understand her reasoning that

throughout their married life had so pained and perplexed him.

"I am very much obliged to you," said Cynthia.

Reeve looked at her wistfully. He took the paper from her and put it in his desk, and he never mentioned the subject again.

The family at Surrum Grange was much upset by Mr. Gerald Lowenbaum's sudden and unexpected departure to Monte Carlo for Christmas. It quite spoiled their house party, they declared. "But there," as Mrs. Lowenbaum remarked, "young men will be young men."

Reeve vibrated between the Manor and the cottage, and every day Margaret went to see Cynthia. It was Margaret who found a respectable cook for the cottage, it was also Margaret who found one of the missing telegrams behind the dining-room clock. The second was still shrouded in mystery and the soup tureen. Cynthia's own telegram was delivered the morning after her arrival by an indignant boy who complained of being kept waiting an unconscionable time upon two occasions, and of being unable to make anybody hear upon the third.

Of Mrs. Mustoe no tidings were obtained, and finding that she had taken nothing more valuable than household stores, Reeve showed no desire to pursue her, feeling that public inquiry into her conduct would not redound to the credit of his household.

No one ever dreamt of connecting her with the Manor House fire.

CHAPTER XXV

MR. WYCHERLY'S ULTIMATUM

"Life is a business, not good cheer;
Ever in wars,
The sun still shineth, there or here;
Whereas the stars
Watch an advantage to appear."

GEORGE HERBERT.

ON the morning of the appointed day Montagu sought William and asked for a definite answer to his request of four weeks ago. William, somewhat nervously, bade the suitor return that night at six o'clock, when he would, his wife and daughter being present, lay before them all three certain conditions upon which he had decided.

Montagu was rather puzzled, and not wholly easy in his mind, for he feared that "conditions" might mean an indefinitely long engagement, and his heart was set upon taking Herrick back to India with him at the end of his year's leave.

She was waiting for him in the hall when he came out from his interview with her father.

"The doctor has been," she cried joyfully, "and Roger is ever so much better; you may come and see him. I'm going to sit with him now for an hour, to let Janet go out and get a breath of fresh air. Yesterday she declared he was better because he was so cross; he's been such an angel all the time that poor Janet was quite nervous."

Herrick ran lightly upstairs, and Montagu followed

her. Outside Roger's door they both paused, for Janet was singing an old Scottish song.

"Oh can ye sew cushions, and can ye sew sheets?
And can ye sing ballaloo when the bairnie greets?"

sang Janet.

Many a time in childhood had Montagu heard his aunt crooning that song to his little brother. Every note, every word was charged heavily with memories, homely, and kind, and gentle as the old song itself.

"Can *you?*" he whispered to Herrick.

"Not sheets or cushions," she answered, "but I could learn, if necessary, and I can certainly sing ballaloo."

"I don't think the sheets will be necessary," Montagu murmured unsteadily; "there is always a Dhirzee——"

Herrick opened the door.

Roger was sitting up in bed in a red dressing-gown, majestic and benign as is only the pampered invalid who possesses a bed-table and a rapidly returning appetite.

"You look very jolly up here, old chap," said Montagu, "and you'll certainly look much better than you did before you went to bed."

"I'm nearly well, Wychelly Sahib, but I've got to stay up here another week, the doctor says so: and I'm going to have a stocking at Christmas . . . and is Janet gone? Daddie an' me has lots of secrets, but I'll tell *you* one—if she's really gone."

Reassured on that head, Roger poured into Wychelly Sahib's sympathetic ear his plans for Janet's benefit at Christmas. Then they all three played "handy-pandy" and Roger guessed right far oftener than either of the others. And Montagu and Herrick built,

by their combined genius, a castle of bricks upon the floor, which Roger demolished by taking careful aim with an india-rubber ball. And Montagu played innumerable games of noughts and crosses with Roger and was beaten almost every time; and they were all three quite ridiculously happy, till Janet came back and sent the visitors away.

"I've a bit of news for you," Herrick said, as they went downstairs; "when Mr. and Mrs. Reeve go back to India they are going to leave Roger with us. Mr. Reeve settled it with mother yesterday. It will make up a little if——" But Herrick never finished her sentence, for on seeing Montagu's face she suddenly rushed upstairs again, two steps at a time.

Lord Delafosse was very kind to Montagu, and the younger man did not fail to respond with such deference, consideration, and small cares as cannot fail to be pleasing to old people when offered spontaneously and affectionately. Long and intimate intercourse with his guardian had familiarised Montagu with many modes of thought somewhat unusual in the present day, so that his lordship found himself able to talk on surprisingly equal terms with one who, as regarded age, might easily have been his grandson. It seemed to Montagu that it would be ungracious and unkind to withhold from his host the chief reason that brought him to Bredon, so it came about that he spoke quite openly of his love and his hopes. Lord Delafosse was by no means unsympathetic. For the last month he had watched his nymph of Bredon, and from what he saw had drawn his own conclusions; but he professed entire ignorance as to William's views when Montagu expressed anxiety as to what his conditions could mean.

When Montagu was shown into the drawing-room

at Bredon punctually at the hour William had fixed, he was conscious of a sense of constraint in the atmosphere quite foreign to that pleasant house. William stood on the hearthrug warming his coat-tails, Margaret sat on one side of the fire and Herrick on the other, and there was about both an air of nervous apprehension that sent a foreboding thrill down Montagu's backbone. He sat down in a chair that formed the apex of the triangle, William standing well in the centre of its base.

Mr. Wycherly opened fire. "We may as well come to the point at once," he said; "Montagu wants to marry Herrick, Herrick wants to marry Montagu, and both have done me the honour to ask my consent. That is so—isn't it?"

William paused, while his daughter and Montagu murmured assent, and the latter felt a frivolous desire to ejaculate "Hear, hear!"

"Now," William continued, "there are many objections to such an arrangement"—Montagu sat forward in his chair, no longer feeling the smallest inclination to applaud—"the chief and insuperable one being that I have the very strongest objection to allowing my only daughter to go to India."

"But how can I marry Montagu at all if I don't go to India?—he *has* to live there," Herrick interrupted. "Daddie, do be reasonable."

"Wait," William said magisterially, "I have not finished. I like you, Montagu. I believe that you would make my girl happy, but I dislike the idea of India. I dislike everything I have ever heard about it——"

"I don't," Herrick interrupted again.

"The risks to health are too great," William continued, as though he had not heard, "the break up of family life, the necessary severance of a woman either

from her husband or from her children, and, finally, the immense distance it would carry Herrick from us were she to marry Montagu while he is in his present profession; all these things taken together have decided me on laying the following proposition before him——" William paused.

This time nobody interrupted, but he was uncomfortably conscious that vigorous repudiation of every suggestion he was about to make was expressed in Montagu's attitude, and hereafter he addressed himself directly to that indignant young man.

"I suggest that on your becoming publicly engaged to Herrick, with the sanction of her mother and myself, you should at the end of your leave return to India and your work, for one or two years more. That, at the end of that time, you leave the Indian Civil Service for good, return to this country, and look out for something to do here. In the meantime, in consideration of your having given up what is, in the opinion of many, an excellent service, I will make it possible for you and Herrick to marry immediately upon your return, settling upon her an income sufficient to maintain you both in modest comfort, and by our united efforts we shall surely be able to find some post for you by which you can augment that income. Of course, eventually, Herrick will inherit everything we have. I am quite aware that I ask you to give up a large income and an excellent pension; in return I offer you enough to live upon in modestly comfortable style at home, and my daughter, so that the equivalent is not an unfair one. Do you accept my terms?"

Montagu rose from his seat. He was very pale, but he spoke quite quietly as he said, "Your offer is

most kind and generous, Mr. Wycherly, but it is quite impossible that I should accept it."

Herrick crossed the room and stood beside him. She took his arm, exclaiming, "I would never marry him if he did!"

"You see, Mr. Wycherly, it is this—my work lies in India. I am to a certain extent pledged to it so long as my health renders it possible. I cannot throw up a certain, and in some ways honourable, career for an uncertainty. I could not live an idle life at home——"

Montagu stopped suddenly; he had just been going to say "on my wife's money," when he remembered that that was exactly what William Wycherly was doing. "Mrs. Wycherly," he said, turning to her, "you are wise and just: do you think it is a fair thing to ask of me?"

Margaret looked at her husband, and not at Montagu, as she said slowly: "I don't think we have any right to expect him to do it."

William was angry. His long speech had been carefully prepared; he had, as he thought, surveyed the situation in every aspect and made a considerate and generous offer, only to be met by a point-blank refusal even to discuss the matter.

"If I have no right to ask him to do this, what earthly right has he to ask me to give him my daughter? If he refuses to leave India for her, how can he expect her to leave us for him and India?"

"It is a little different," Montagu said patiently. "I know that I have no 'rights' in the matter at all, except the right that every honest man has to ask a woman to be his wife, if he loves her and can keep her in comfort. That is the only right I claim. If

Herrick were unwilling to go with me, there would be an end of everything."

"There will be an end of everything so far as I am concerned as it is," William exclaimed. "I don't suppose Herrick will actually disobey me in the matter, and I have told you that my mind is made up. Most men would consider themselves lucky to get Herrick on any terms; you cannot really care for her at all."

All the time Montagu felt that warm young pressure on his arm. It was very comforting; it helped him to keep his temper. But he was hopelessly handicapped, for all the arguments he might have brought forward to strengthen his position were closed to him by the one fact that William Wycherly had done precisely what he found it so impossible to do.

If Margaret liked Montagu before, she loved him now, for she alone of the three realised why he had so little to say for himself.

William went over all the reasons in favour of his scheme once more. Once more Montagu respectfully and firmly declared his inability to fall in with it. The clock in the hall struck seven and William held out his hand.

"Then there is no more to be said. I am very sorry, Montagu, for I like you—we all like you—but I tell you candidly that I wish we had never seen your face, and as, in the circumstances, we are unlikely to see much of it in the future, I will bid you good-bye."

Dazed and in silence, Montagu shook the hand held out to him. Margaret had risen, pale and agitated; she gave him both her hands and kissed him.

Herrick came with him into the hall, carefully shutting the door behind her. He took her in his arms and kissed her, felt the warm sweetness of her

arms about his neck, tasted the salt tears hanging on her lashes, and for the moment could not feel wholly miserable.

"I shall never marry anybody else, dear," she whispered. "Daddie will have to give in."

"But how long shall we have to wait? What shall I do without you? And I must go; I *can't* stay on in Bredon after what he said to me."

"Don't go to-night, dear—promise."

"But, dearest!"

"Promise!"

What could he do but promise, with her dear face so close to his?

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RESULT

"So glad of this as they I cannot be."
The Tempest.

WHEN Montagu reached Bredon Delafosse he was informed that, if agreeable to him, his lordship desired his society in the large library. The glow of the fire and the old lord's shaded lamp made but a small illumination in that vast room, and it seemed to Montagu that he traversed miles of darkness before he reached the little circle of light in which his host was sitting.

Lord Delafosse tilted the shade, so that for the space of three seconds the light shone full on Montagu's pale face and shining eyes; then he dropped it again, saying:

"I trust you will not think it vexatious of me that I am extremely desirous of hearing the result of your embassy. But I see how it has been—father unreasonable, tyrannical, absurd—fathers generally are; I should be so myself if I had any daughters—you will be so—we all are—but your lady loves you? Will it distress you to tell me precisely what form Mr. Wycherly's opposition to your wishes takes?"

Almost word for word Montagu repeated William Wycherly's long speech. Lord Delafosse listened attentively.

"And you?" he asked when Montagu had finished.

"What reasons did you give for not accepting his very handsome offer?"

"I told him that my work was in India, that I was in honour pledged to it, that I couldn't live at home in idleness——"

"On your wife's money," Lord Delafosse suggested.

"No, my lord, I didn't say that. I couldn't. Every way I was handicapped. You see, it is Mrs. Wycherly who has the money in that family. The place was left to her, and I remember my guardian telling me that he thought it very fine of him to do as he had done. He was in business, and very successful, but when his wife came into this money he gave it all up because he felt that where they lived neither she nor Herrick had the social advantages which were their due. It must have been very hard, but he did it. But then for twelve years he had worked for them, he had shown he could work—whereas he asks me . . . an impossibility."

The old lord's bright eyes were kind and quizzical during this recital.

"And what did Mrs. Wycherly say?" he asked.

"She said nothing until I demanded of her if she thought it a fair thing to expect of me, and then she said it was not."

"Did you happen to know that she ran away with the stipulating William?"

Montagu gasped. "Ran away! Mrs. Wycherly!" he repeated stupidly.

Lord Delafosse chuckled.

"Ran away with him when she wasn't much older than Herrick is now. Of course, her people wouldn't look at him because he was in the wine trade, any more than her husband will look at you because you happen to assist in some small degree in the govern-

ment of India. Perhaps it's as well you didn't know that, or you'd have been more handicapped still. Of course, Herrick knows nothing whatever about it."

Montagu sighed. "Herrick won't run away with me," he said sadly, "she loves her father far too much."

"There's the dressing bell; my man will be here for me in another instant. If I were you I would not be too cast down. Organisation is our good William's pet foible, but I question whether in this instance his daughter will fit into his scheme."

That night the dinner table at Bredon Manor was very silent, and William Wycherly was in the trying position of one who feels he is mentally boycotted while outwardly he is treated with the utmost consideration.

Not yet had he asked Margaret her opinion upon what had passed in the drawing-room; and unasked she was the last woman in the world to volunteer it.

Had his wife and daughter been in the slightest degree disagreeable or sulky, had they persisted in discussing the vexed question or pestered him with arguments in Montagu's favour, then would William joyfully have hugged his grievance and have been strengthened in his sense of injury and misunderstanding. But this chastened gravity—he could not even call it sadness—was particularly trying, conscious as he was that in the minds of both he had been weighed in the balance and found wanting in fairness and straightforward dealing.

His wife and his daughter sat one on each side of him, and throughout that most uncomfortable meal he felt that his mental horizon was raked perpetually by two pairs of particularly truthful, long-sighted eyes; and William began to doubt whether after all

he had played quite the dignified and leading part he had intended at the beginning of the evening.

He sat long over his wine that night—so long that Herrick came to him saying she was tired and would like to bid him good-night. Her dress was of some soft stuff that reflected no lights and seemed to clothe her in shadowy atmospheric blue, from which her neck and arms emerged triumphantly white, rounded, and lovely, and William was at once reminded of that night when she had shown him "her most secret heart." His own gave a great leap as he remembered it, and as suddenly contracted with the sudden fear lest, by his own action, he might have destroyed the beautiful confidence that had bound them so closely in the past.

Herrick stooped to kiss him, and he caught her head between his hands and held her face back from his own, looking fondly and sadly into her eyes. "My dear," he said very gently, "do you think you have got a very cruel daddie?"

The loving, faithful eyes filled with sudden tears, and Herrick cast herself on her knees beside him, exclaiming passionately, "It's not the cruelty, my dearest dad, it's the injustice; listen!" She knelt back from him and spread out her hands, palms outwards. "We ask him here, and make him love us; we burn his books, the books that belonged to one he loved best in the world; and then, when we are sure that he does love us, and looks upon us as his friends, what do we do to this lonely man? We ask him to do something that no man with a spark of manhood in him could do: and because he won't, we shut the door upon him. Daddie, I want a *man* for my husband—a man who carves out his own career, who has a thousand interests and ambitions besides his love for me. What use have I for a tame little husband who would be

content to potter through life with no object but to be near *me,* to please *me?* You and I dearly loved the old house where I was born, where your work was at first. Would *you* have submitted to conditions such as you want to impose upon Montagu, when you asked for mother? Would you, daddie? Tell me; I want to know."

The impetuous, broken voice ceased. Slowly, slowly, William turned and looked into his daughter's face. Behind the kneeling girl, and above hers, he saw the pale face of his wife.

Margaret had followed Herrick into the room, unheard, during the girl's appeal.

"*Would* you, William?" Margaret echoed.

Truly the heavy guns were in position and were shelling the besieged garrison without mercy; one by one the outposts fell, till the enemy was in the very trenches . . . and the garrison capitulated.

An hour later, before her dressing table, Herrick stood barefooted upon the tiger-skin Montagu sent her from India in his second year, She looked at herself in the glass. Her eyes were red and swollen, but this could not wholly dim their light. Her cheeks were flushed and tear-stained, but her mouth, though tremulous, smiled happily. "I hope I shall be prettier to-morrow," she said. She stood staring at her image, seeing nothing, for her thoughts had gone back to the Shakespeare meeting in Mrs. Holt's drawing-room, and the lines she had spoken to Phebe sang in her ears:

> "'Tis not her glass, but you that flatter her;
> And out of you she sees herself more proper
> Than any of her lineaments can show her:—
> But, mistress, know yourself: Down on your knees,
> And thank God fasting for a good man's love."

Herrick went down on her knees.

. . . . . .

"And so they were married and lived happily ever after?"

What a commonplace story!

The most beautiful things in life are also the most common. The love of man for maid, of maid for man; the love of little children; the wisdom and tenderness of the old—these are the things that come within the experience of us all, and can never cease to be as new and wonderful as they are eternal. And for those who in youth have learned to love and pray, "this world is as much God's world as the world to come."

THE END